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MARX: ESSENCE AND THE PROBLEM OF SOCIAL DETERMINISM

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

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by

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The undersigned certify that they have read and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled Marx: Essence and the Problem of Social Determinism, submitted by J. A. Brook in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

ABSTRACT

In classical political philosophy (for example, the theories of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau) an important role is assigned to a concept of human nature, and such a concept is also commonly to be found in ordinary arguments about politics and morality. Marx comes to grips with such views, and a number of other aspects of social philosophy, in his early writings, particularly the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and The German Ideology. One of the central themes of this thesis is the attempt to expound and defend the view that Marx presents as an alternative to traditional theories of human nature, his doctrine of essence. A distinction is made between 'the essence of man' and 'man's essence' : the first has to do with questions of philosophical method and it is argued that, for Marx, the second is an historical fact, what I call a developing constant.

In order to show how Marx's doctrine of essence typifies his philosophical vision, this thesis also explores the Subject-Object and Individual-Society distinctions, and the meanings of Social Determinism. In passing (though this is of considerable importance), there emerge a number of interesting resemblances between the philosophical attitudes of Marx and Wittgenstein.

Of course, this thesis in no way purports to be an exhaustive treatment of Marx's thought. But it does suggest some reasons for thinking that Marx is both more interesting and more defensible when we depart from the usual assessment of his thought as a formal metaphysical system. One of the principle merits of Marx's theory is that it enables us, in a certain sense, to transcend theory and reach what Hegel called "the spiritual daylight of the present."

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SECTION I

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Even some marxists have claimed that Marx allows human subjectivity no place in the inexorable evolution of economic forces. Marx, they maintain, held that economic forces are 'first movers' and/or 'continuous creators' of human beings (a claim sometimes supported by the substitution of the more amorphous concept of 'material relations' for 'economic forces'); human personalities are at most accidental particularizations of these forces. This 'marxist' account of Marx is, however, at best a one-sided caricature. It ignores his intellectual biography and makes it difficult to comprehend why he wrote philosophy, or how he could condemn a society which he characterized in precisely this way.

In fact, Marx is a humanist. His faith in the importance of all-round development of the human potential places him in the tradition of Renaissance humanism and he also shares many of the values of nineteenth century humanism, although he always casts these values in a more realistic form. But the point I am presently making is that, having--like the anti-religious humanists of the nineteenth century--rescued man from God, Marx is not about to abandon him again, this time to abstract economic forces. Marx describes one society, bourgeois society, in terms which are often economic, but he does it as part of a life-long program to destroy its capitalist underpinnings. Far from believing that the conditions of this society were predetermined or good, Marx spent his entire life teaching men how to end them.

His early philosophical works make it clear how entirely Marx's account of the human condition depends on each man's being in principle something quite other than an economic pawn. At twenty-eight he wrote: "The first principle of all human history, of course, is the existence of living individuals."¹ Each man, Marx argued, is potentially a unique individual; and society could be a harmonious organization of such individuals. Because Marx thought that the fetters which prevented his contemporaries from so much as seeing that they could be such men and live such lives are exposed by laying bare the economic foundation of their present existence, he studied the economics of bourgeois society. At the same time, he consistently attempted to humanize economics, to embody economic laws and categories in the behaviour of living men in social groups. If Marx sometimes seems to reduce history to economics, it is partly because he is also trying to make economics historical, and partly because the history of bourgeois society is pre-eminently a history of economic sovereignty.

Marx's polemics against philosophical reductionists and dualists cannot be ignored. It might be objected that he vitiates his own anti-reductionism by selecting only material relations as objects for study. He argues, however, that as a matter of fact there are nothing but material relations to study. He does this by taking

¹Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The German Ideology (GI), Parts I and III, R. Pascal (ed.), (International Publishers, New York, 1960), p. 7.

material relations to include, roughly, every product of human activity of every kind (including language acts), and everything man has learned², and so on. His materialism is a kind of vigorous anti-dualism (and this is why he sometimes expresses the same viewpoint by denying that he is a materialist³); his theory of materialism is, in a sense, an attempt to escape from theory, and to concentrate on the description and analysis of the situation of concrete, living men.

That men do not as yet comprehend the conditions of their lives, and that they are often enslaved by these conditions, were two of the reasons why Marx thought materialism to be the correct viewpoint from which to study man. Yet even if every act of his contemporaries was an act of self-enslavement because of the irresistible demand of economic 'necessities', Marx still thought it a truism to say that only men could create these necessities. If men can no longer create, it is because men are basically creative. Marx made the discovery that important, even defining, truths about men in his era were manifest in economic forces and relations. But they were just truths about his era; in another era, similar truths

²Cf. Karl Marx, Theses on Feuerbach, Thesis III, in Marx and Engels, Selected Works (SW), Vol. II, (Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1962), p. 402.

³Cf. Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 (EPM), (Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1961), p. 156: "Here we see how consistent naturalism or humanism distinguishes itself both from idealism and materialism, constituting at the same time the unifying truth of both."

might be manifest in quite different phenomena--in the creation of beauty, say.⁴

The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances, and that the educator himself needs educating.⁵

Put simply, this essay will argue that the 'philosophical' problem of freedom, the problem of social determinism against which this quotation is directed, is a pseudo-problem; it cannot be maintained practically and, more importantly, it cannot even be stated coherently. The supposed problem of freedom is a dilemma which can be created only in abstraction, and which loses even coherence when examined in terms of the actual conditions of human life.

To find humanist arguments in Marx, his writings must be seen in a special light. They must be seen as largely consisting of polemical attacks on the premises of the political economy of his time, premises mainly a product of the political theory of possessive individualism, to use C. B. MacPherson's now well-known phrase. Many of his most pivotal arguments, that is to say, must be seen as making

⁴Friedrich Engels, (Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy, in SW, Vol. II, p. 393), speaks as if it is conceivable that forces other than economic might someday be used to explain the human condition, though as a matter of fact this has not been possible at any time in the history of the world up to the present.

⁵Karl Marx, Theses on Feuerbach, Thesis III, Ibid., p. 402.

not absolute claims, but polemical corrections⁶; and his method often consists of thrusting tautologies, or even insightful falsehoods, in the path of individualist or utilitarian logic.

The tautologies are developed according to a particular pattern of analogy. The pattern can be described using any number of general assertions about human beings (e.g., that man is rational, or moral, or just, or free) but I shall use the claim that man is rational. It can be coherently stated of a man both that he is rational and that he is irrational. Two different senses of rationality are involved. The first sense is external to the domain of discourse concerning rationality and asserts the legitimacy of that domain. To claim that man is rational (1) is to claim that it makes sense to speak of man in terms of rationality, that the domain of discourse is applicable to human beings. The sense used in claiming that a particular man is rational (2) or irrational, of course, is internal to the domain of discourse. The distinction can be brought out by considering the antonyms of the two different senses: the antonym of rational (1) is non-rational or, in the appropriate contexts, brutish, insensate, nonconscious; the antonyms of rational (2) are irrational, stupid, thick-headed, uneducated and so on. I have used this pattern of analogy to explicate the marxian notions of essence, competition, objectivity and freedom.

⁶As Heraclitus already knew 2,500 years ago, "The lord who oracle is at Delphi neither speaks out nor conceals, but gives a sign."

(A Selection of the Fragments of Heraclitus, unpublished, Colwyn Williamson (ed.), Fragment no. 1).

Marx's insightful falsehoods often consist of distinctions which are useful only so long as their abolition is kept constantly in sight. The claim that 'life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life' is one of these, and most usual formulations by Marx of the subject-object distinction are others.

Both these tactics are thoroughly dialectical because both depend on no key statement having an absolute meaning and on no collection of statements making absolutely true assertions. Philosophy is methods, stratagems, and its task is to explode the presumption to eternality of philosophical claims, including socialist ones. To see Marx as making absolute claims is almost always a distortion. For Marx, philosophy is dialectics.

SECTION II

THE ESSENCE OF MAN

CHAPTER 1

Marx's Two Doctrines of Essence

Introduction

The fact that men are not now free, the fact that they are influenced by forces over which they have no control, holds no clear philosophical implications for the possibility of freedom because it is men who create the forces which now enslave them. Marx's two doctrines of essence will put us at a good viewpoint from which to sketch the logical landscape of this assertion.

In fact, what I call Marx's first doctrine of essence is more helpful than his second in finding this viewpoint. The first doctrine is philosophical, by which I mean that it is a stage-setting device having little or no descriptive or reformative value in itself. It is aimed, specifically, at casting the arguments of utilitarian individualism in a new light, a light which exposes their errors. This doctrine leads Marx to the tautologies which I suggest are one of his most important philosophical devices. It consists of three propositions: 'Man is social', 'Man is natural' and 'Nature is a human creation'. The use of these general truths in philosophical argument can be hinted at if we imagine Marx saying to a theorist of individualism: 'But man is social; this is the key to understanding him. Try approaching man from this point of view and see what happens to the difficulties in your theory'. Man, in Marx's view, like language in Wittgenstein's, "is a labyrinth of

paths. You approach from one side and know your way about; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about."⁷ We lose our bearings in the study of man unless we approach him through his social relations. Marx employs aphorisms pointing out this truth in different ways; and these aphorisms constitute the first doctrine of essence.

Marx's second doctrine of essence is more practical (i.e., concrete and historical). Man's essence in this sense refers to the way human activity would tend to develop, the form it would assume, were it unfettered by restrictive social relations⁸; or, to rephrase the point, the characteristics of men's acts which would express the fullest development of this tendency. Because men's acts tend to assume a form different from that dictated by their social relations only at certain points in history, the nature of this tendency changing from era to era, essence in the second sense, along with the restrictive social relations, is used to analyse a certain range of historical situations (e.g., the advent of capitalism, or socialism). Because both essence in this sense and its social relations show the truth of the first doctrine of essence,

⁷Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations (PI), G.E.M. Anscombe, (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1963), remark 203.

⁸This draws attention to one way of formulating the important differences between Marx and the greatest theorist of individualism, Hobbes. For Hobbes, human nature consists of a sort of Galilean 'pure motion' which is always and necessarily distorted or diverted by social relations. Hence, there is a sense in which social relations for Hobbes must always be restrictive. For Marx, on the other hand, human nature is the result of the combined acts of men throughout history; and only particular social relations in particular historical circumstances, rather than social relations as such, are restrictive. If we borrow Hobbes' own terminology, we may say that for Hobbes social relations are artificial; for Marx they are natural.

the second is posterior to the first. In addition, the second exists as one part of a domain of discourse defined by the first. The terms I use to distinguish these two concepts reflect this relationship: I call the first the 'essence of man' and the second 'man's essence' (as opposed to his actual existence).

A. The First Doctrine of Essence

Marx and Engels say that the 'essence of man' is a number of "general results" derived from "...the consideration of the historical development of men".⁹ Concepts of 'need' and of man's ability to produce are among the first results of Marx and Engels' study: it is needs, in a very general sense, that begin human activity, and it is by producing that men first distinguish themselves from animals.¹⁰ Neither of these are essential (neither are sufficiently general), however, because "...the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations."¹¹ Social relations are "the relations of civil society".¹² "Society, however, is not merely an aggregate

⁹GI, p. 15.

¹⁰GI, p. 7.

¹¹Marx, Theses on Feuerbach, Thesis VI.

¹²Karl Marx, Grundrisse, (in Bottomore, Karl Marx: Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy, (Toronto, McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1964), p. 96).

Marx speaks of civil society in two different but related ways: "The form of intercourse determined by the existing productive forces at all previous historical stages, and in its

of individuals; it is the sum of the relation in which these individuals stand to one another."¹³ For example, "Being a slave or a citizen is a socially determined relation between an individual A and an individual B. Individual A is not as such a slave. He is a slave only in and through society."¹⁴ Both men's needs and the form of these needs, both men's productive activity and the specific form

turn determining these, is civil society. Already we see here how this civil society is the true source and theatre of all history....Civil society embraces the whole material intercourse of individuals within a definite stage in the development of productive forces. It embraces the whole commercial and industrial life of this stage and, insofar, transcends the State and nation, though, on the other hand again, it must assert itself towards foreign peoples as nationality, and inwardly it must organize itself as State. The word 'civil society' emerged in the eighteenth century, when property relations had already extricated themselves from the ancient and medieval communal society. Civil society as such only emerges with the bourgeois...." (GI, pp. 26-7)

In all but the last line of this quotation, Marx and Engels are explaining their more general notion of 'civil society'. Suddenly in the last line, they begin to talk about the other meaning they give the term. When they refer to 'civil society as such' they are no longer talking about the form of all social relations, but of the particular social relations of one class, the bourgeois. Though these relations, the general will of one class, negate much that Marx believed to be the nature of a 'civil' civil society, they make up a true civil society nevertheless. Again we see Marx using the category distinction between a concept which establishes a domain of discourse and a concept of the same name within the domain which only constitutes one part of it. This is confusing enough; but worse, in this case the term within the domain names the negation of Marx's criteria for the concrete achievement of the ideals of the domain. Usually the reverse is true, usually the term external to the domain (e.g., 'rationality') is used within the domain to name the satisfaction of the internal ideal of the internal ideal of the domain (in this case, rational human acts).

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

of this activity, depend on the fact that men are social, i.e., that they live in civil society and that civil society shapes their acts, intentions and beliefs. But this is not strong enough. Needs and productive activity are impossible unless men are social because we cannot conceive of human existence at all except as social human existence. Social relations, "this sum of productive forces, forms of capital and social forms of intercourse, which every individual and generation finds in existence as something given, is the real basis of what the philosophers have conceived as 'substance' and 'essence of man'."¹⁵ Social relations, and not facts about men as single individuals, are the 'essence of man' because social relations depend on nothing, but facts about individuals depend on social relations for their explication.

We can now add a fourth proposition, an active principle tying together the other three, to the general propositions of the doctrine of the 'essence of man'. It is this: 'Men determine and are determined by other men'. This principle and two of the three propositions, that 'man is natural' and 'nature is a human creation', are merely slightly different ways of stating the core of Marx's first doctrine of essence, that man is social. Beginning from this point, let us see what Marx's second notion of essence, 'man's essence', means.

¹⁵GI, p. 29.

B. The Second Doctrine of Essence and its Uses

History shows us that the form of men's acts (the picture of the world in which they are seen to fit, the relations of man to man through which they are performed) change from era to era. In fact, all-pervasive changes in the form of men's acts are among the most important markers of the transitions from era to era. As Hegel says, "The history of the world is not a theatre of happiness. Periods of happiness are blank pages in it, for they are periods of harmony--periods when the antithesis is in abeyance."¹⁶ Change involves conflict: "Progress, as Marx and Engels always saw, bears two faces: it remains progress."¹⁷ The secret of Marx's second notion of essence can be uncovered only if we see that it consists, not just in social relations, but in social relations which change.

If a man's acts are acts, they change things--including the men who act. But men act through a specific set of relations with other men. These relations affect the form of men's acts. (To take a quite trivial example, the acts of a starving man and of a gourmet towards food are quite different, yet clearly the starving man, at least, is a result of the society in which he lives; he is not starving by his own choice.) Sufficient little changes in men's acts result in a change in kind (enough grains of sand make a heap) and

¹⁶G. W. F. Hegel, Philosophy of History, (New York, Dover, 1956), p. 29.

¹⁷Alasdair MacIntyre, "Freedom and Revolution", Labor Review, Vol. 5, No. 1, February-March, 1960, p. 20.

suddenly men's acts find themselves in conflict with the social relations within which they exist. At these points in history, man's essence appears.

Marx, like Hegel, speaks of this change as the transformation of quantitative changes into a qualitative change. They use the word aufheben (translated variously as 'sublate', 'annul', 'supersecede', but seldom 'transcend', and meaning 'to annul', 'to cancel' and also 'to preserve in the new') to describe this sort of change. Aufheben is change which at once supersedes and takes up (though reinterprets) the truth, the value, of the superseded. Intellectual development at its best manifests this kind of change, and more importantly, so does change from one period of history to another. The concepts of productive forces (the form of human activity in an historical era) and social relations (the system of co-operation of the era, which form activity and which can appear in the form of the contrary to co-operation, competition) allow us to explain such changes in kind and the appearance of 'man's essence' which is the motive force of them.

In periods of harmony (e.g., in the middle of the medieval period), productive forces and social relations work through each other without substantial conflict. Acts, productive forces, constantly develop, however, so that:

At a certain stage in their development, the productive forces of /a/ society come in conflict with the existing relations of production /social relations/....From the form of development of the productive forces, these relations turn into their fetters.¹⁸

¹⁸Karl Marx, Preface to A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy, SW, Vol. 1, p. 329.

Social relations cease being adequate. They cannot allow the new forms of production (e.g., free labour in the late medieval period) full expression. It appears that the conflict¹⁹ which ensues should be between social relations and the potential for new social relations contained in the new form of productive activity, and in a sense it is. It is manifest, however, in the conflict between the distorted form which is the only form of expression the old social relations can allow the new productive forces and the 'natural' but unexpressed form of these forces. It is this conflict which men feel and in terms of which they act. Even though the old relations and old forms of production may prevent men from understanding what is wrong or seeing the new potential in their activity, once the new forces exist, "Then begins an epoch of social revolution."²⁰ Productive forces which had steadily advanced within, and been shaped by, a set of social relations, change into a demand for a radically new set of social relations. At these points, man's essence appears-- as a contradiction between man's real nature and the conditions of his actual life, his 'existence'.²¹

¹⁹Marx and other socialist theorists use the word 'contradiction' to characterize this conflict when the conflict is developing. A contradiction in this sense is "...a dynamic relation moving inexorably to a resolution." Marx, EPM, p. 98.

²⁰Op. cit., p. 329.

²¹Cf. GI, p. 34. This conflict bears comparison with Hegel's notion of the conflict of the 'real' and the 'actual' in human reality. By the actual, Hegel is referring to the present stage of development of reason, the present level of self-possession of men, and by the 'real' he means the ideal, the stage of complete self-consciousness. Marx was less optimistic (or pessimistic) about the possibility of man's ever reaching one fixed perfection. Hence his notion of the ideal in any given age is closely tied to the existing conditions of the age. We can, however, see the influence of Hegel's distinction on Marx.

Man's essence is expressed through productive forces when these forces are in conflict with social relations (when they do not conflict we would not make the distinction). Essence in this sense has to do with the form men's acts tend to assume; this form appears as more advanced and in conflict with less advanced social relations, though the form itself is a creation of just these social relations.

Man's essence appears and disappears in history according to whether men's productive acts are or are not adequately expressed in social relations (i.e., according to whether or not history is in a period of epochal advance). All this sounds very strange until we allow that Marx's concept of man's essence is history-bound.

First, we have need of such a concept only when there is some tension between two things, one of which appears as more 'truly human'. Engels describes this tension by speaking of individuals' persons and their accidents, his reasons being that "...in spite of the consciously-desired aims of individuals, accidents appear to reign on the surface of society"²² and that these accidents serve to restrict freedom. If this and similar problems did not exist, Engels' distinction would make no sense and we should have no use for a concept of 'man's essence': "The difference between the individual as a person and what is accidental to him, /however/, is not a conceptual difference but an historical fact."²³

²²Friedrich Engels, Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy, SW, Vol. II, p. 391.

²³GI, p. 70.

We formulate a concept of man's essence, then, only in certain historical circumstances. But before I can argue for the usefulness of such a concept it is necessary to deal with certain preliminary problems.

We are faced with three confusions: that man's essence lies in his consciously-desired aims; that society is a realm of chance, or accidents; and, arising out of these two, that man's essence is either his response to social 'accidents', or something unrelated to society. The second confusion depends on not seeing society as a human creation. If it makes sense to "...distinguish a right way and a wrong way" concerning any motion, then the motion is governed by rules.²⁴ Since this distinction applies to all significant human acts, and since society is a human creation, it cannot be a realm of chance. If society appears as 'accidental' to my life, this does not mean that it is not governed by rules, but only that it is governed by rules different from those demanded by my life. The first confusion is cleared away by seeing that society forms men's acts, but that these acts can develop beyond the possibilities offered by particular forms of society, and even beyond the possibilities men see in their own acts:

the question is not what this or that proletarian, or even the whole of the proletariat at the moment considers its aim. The question is what the proletariat is, and what, consequent on that being, it will be compelled to do.²⁵

²⁴Peter Winch, The Idea of a Social Science, (New York, Humanities Press, 1958), p. 58.

²⁵Karl Marx, The Holy Family (HF), (Moscow, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), p. 53.

We discover man's essence by studying the way particular productive acts have developed beyond a particular set of social relations, not by studying what men think their own development has been (as they express this opinion in particular desires for change). Part of the distinction Marx draws between materialism and idealism is found in this observation. We now come to the third confusion. Man's essence is no more to be found in his emotional responses to his life than in his thoughts about it. Anguish, frustration, "powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, self-estrangement, isolation"²⁶ are not essential; they depend on conditions. Though men's responses to their conditions give us important clues to the conditions themselves, it is to these conditions, to social relations, that we must turn. The second clause of the third confusion has been dealt with.

A concept like man's essence would be totally inappropriate to analysing some parts of the Middle Ages. Engels' distinction between the 'individual as a person' and 'what is accidental to him' is simply inapplicable to such a period. The individual's accidents (especially his social role; e.g., nobleman or serf) were part of his individuality: man as a person was indistinguishable from man as a social actor. But in the course of time the productive acts appropriate to these social functions created conditions (e.g., the freeing, either voluntary or by escape, of great numbers of serfs) which were no longer compatible with a society of these social relations.

²⁶Charles W. Hobart, and Nancy Warne, "Types of Alienation: Etiology and Interrelationships", Journal of Existentialism, Vol. 5, No. 18, Fall 1964, p. 183.

Men began to act as if they believed their ability to work was 'free labour' (though they themselves did not know their acts had this character). Because the form productive activity takes when it is 'free labour' is incompatible with medieval social relations, a period of social upheaval began. At this point a distinction between man's essence (his freedom as free labour, his equality as economic equality) and his accidents, his existence, becomes cogent.

The results of this historical epoch were the social relations called bourgeois society, one of the most important features of which is that "producers do not come into contact with each other until they exchange their product".²⁷ Exchange, a dominating social relation in bourgeois life, has this result:

The specific social character of each producer's labour does not show itself except in the act of exchange. In other words, the labour of the individual asserts itself as part of the labour of society, only by means of the relations which the act of exchange establishes directly between the products and indirectly, through them, between the producers.²⁸

This relationship was necessary to develop the possibilities inherent in capitalist forces of production (the form of activity of capitalists). But by developing this activity, capitalist society eventually gives rise to forces of production which outstrip these relations. Specifically, capitalist forces of production have advanced bourgeois society sufficiently to allow man to be free; this capacity for freedom is the new form implicit in post-capitalist

²⁷Karl Marx, "Fetishism of Commodities", Capital, (Moscow, Foreign Languages Publishing House, undated), Vol. I, p. 73.

²⁸Ibid.

productive acts--which is to say, the capacity for freedom is man's essence in mature capitalist society.²⁹ Capitalist social relations are not adequate to this new form of man's productive acts. To men seeing through eyes formed by man's new potential for freedom, "...the relations connecting the labour of one individual with that of the rest [now] appear, not as direct social relations between individuals³⁰ at work, but as what they really are [now], material relations between persons and social relations between things."³¹

From the point at which freedom appears in history as a concrete possibility (even given that the subjects of the freedom themselves do not see it), the class that suffers most by this now up-side-down social relationship, the working-class, "...is in its abasement, indignation at that abasement...(in the words of Hegel)".³²

Capitalism creates conditions which polarize the split between man's essence and his existence as no other social order has done. Yet it also makes it harder for men to see what their lives are really like, and hence how they should change them. The conditions of life in capitalist society appear inevitable:

In pre-capitalist societies one finds a sense of inevitability and fatality about natural catastrophes such as floods and famines. In capitalist societies men learn that there is no inevitability here. Where they come to feel inevitability and fatality is not in nature, but in society.³³

²⁹This, of course, glosses over Hegel's and Marx's claim that 'the essence of man is freedom'. But that issue is extremely complicated and it would be quite premature to join it here.

³⁰As they appeared for Hobbes, say. Had Hobbes seen individuals as individual workers, however, he might have understood them quite differently.

³¹Karl Marx, "Fetishism of Commodities", op. cit., p. 73.

³²Marx, HF, p. 51.

³³MacIntyre, op. cit., p. 22.

With the discovery of powerful tools such as the hydrogen bomb, men no longer feel that any natural condition is totally out of the range of human influence. Yet at the same time their human relations take on a mask of 'objectivity' and unchangeability.

Only man can produce and he produces for nothing but himself and other men. But in a mature capitalist economy, a man appears to produce for an objective, non-human, principle, profit. A man's labour is actually turned against his best interests, and takes on the appearance of being done for the sake of non-human abstract entities. Furthermore, in mature capitalism the machines themselves appear to produce. Society is, for its members, a closed order indifferent to their interests; a phenomenon as strikingly Stoical as the belief in the non-potency of the self which this society inspires. As Heraclitus said even before the Stoics:

Although men are intimately acquainted with the Logos, yet they are alienated from it, and those things which they meet daily seem strange.³⁴

Because relations appropriate to human beings dealing with one another appear as relations between manufactured articles, and because relations between manufactured articles appear as relations between people, these categories are confused: there occurs what Marx calls a mystification. Hence it is very difficult for capitalist men even to see their life as it is, let alone understand what it is.

³⁴Heraclitus, A Selection of the Fragments of Heraclitus, ed. Williamson, unpublished, Fragment 27.

An historical drama, however, will move inexorably to its conclusion whether or not the actors understand the drama. Once new productive forces are afoot, they work independently of any particular individual. (Marx refers to this as the 'practical expression of necessity'³⁵). Capitalism, almost uniquely, produces a situation in which these new forces will come into the most violent conflict with the old social relations.

During capitalism's mature stage, the stage at which productive forces change to become potentially free, its social relations develop so that they are more than just inadequate to the new productive possibilities. They actually intensify the contradiction, by concentrating wealth in a few hands, by enhancing the reversal of relations between man and man, and man and things, by taking away from workers any vestige of an opportunity to express their full productive possibilities even as capitalist forces of production, and so on. Because capitalism carries with it the seeds of total revolution, it carries the seeds of total freedom. This is the case even though capitalism also makes conscious Stoics of people suffering it.

In mature capitalism, man's essence is his capacity for freedom; his existence is the social relations which form his productive acts and which prevent him from expressing his freedom. The contradictions between essence and existence can exist even though no

³⁵Marx, HF, p. 52.

single person is aware of it. But a Stoic, even though he could not formulate the two sides of it, is aware of the contradiction, as the fact that he is resigned to unfreedom shows.

As I have indicated, Marx has two quite different notions of the essence of man. The first is philosophical, and the second, as we have just seen, is historical. To explain the nature of the second, man's essence, is to explain its uses. This is not the case with the first, which has two uses. It is a stage-setting device, and its propositions name domains of discourse in which certain otherwise-formidable philosophical problems dissolve.

C. The Uses of Marx's First Doctrine of Essence: THE STRATAGEM OF
TAUTOLOGY

The 'essence of man' consists of three obvious truths, that 'man is social', 'man is natural' and 'nature is a human creation', all tied together by the principle, involved in each of them, that men determine the lives of other men--i.e., that men exist only through social relations. Almost all of the near-tautologies which Marx uses in demolishing opposing opinions arise directly out of his first doctrine of essence. His tautologies and near-tautologies serve his purpose because they name domains of discourse in which opposing opinions lose their semblance of being good sense.

Human existence is of a piece: it makes no more sense to speak of social relations without individuals than of individuals free from involvement with other men. Yet when I speak of social

relations as I do in the above paragraph, I seem to be saying that social relations are 'prior' to the individuals who relate (and I claimed earlier that social relations are prior to needs because needs depend on social relations for their explication but social relations depend on nothing). This apparent contradiction may be removed by pointing out that the priority of social relations is methodological and not existential. Existentially, needs, social relations, consciousness, the ability to act, a physical body, and a good many other things are necessary to human existence, each being as indispensable as any of the others.

We can avoid ineptness or emptiness in our assertions only by presenting the model as what it is, as an object of comparison--as, so to speak, a measuring-rod; not as a pre-conceived idea to which reality must correspond.³⁶

I want to say that social relations are prior, first and obviously, because they universally affect human existence; and secondly, because the actual shape of human existence at any particular moment can be adequately explained only if analysis begins from the point of view of social relations. Earlier I noted Wittgenstein's aphorism about language: "You approach from one side and know your way about; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about".³⁷ Human existence is like language in this respect; you approach it as political, as artistic, as it is consciously conceived by existing human beings, and you lose your way.

³⁶Ludwig Wittgenstein, PI, Remark 131.

³⁷Ibid., Remark 203.

The principles by which each particular analysis could be bound into a homogeneous totality are missing. But when you comprehend men through their social relations all their other aspects begin to make sense. Then, in fact, the importance of these aspects (including their importance as shapers of social relations) becomes clear, and you can without danger treat human existence from the standpoint of individuals (i.e., people acting productively), or consciousness (the opinions of the actors), and so on. It is necessary, however, that you begin by treating human life from the point of view of 'civil society'. The priority of social relations is an analytic stratagem, not an existential truth.

Now, however, the distinctness of the two notions of essence is endangered. By reasserting this distinctness, I can also describe the uses of Marx's first doctrine. The two doctrines are distinct, of course, because the first doctrine, the essence of man, includes both the second, man's essence, and its contradiction, restrictive social relations. But this hierarchical ordering applies merely to their exposition. The two phenomena which the concepts describe bear no direct comparison. 'Man's essence' describes an historical fact; 'the essence of man' describes conceptual truths and hence philosophical approaches. Marx's doctrine of the 'essence of man' sets the stage, chooses the path, for analysis and it establishes the legitimacy of the uses to which various domains of discourse are put within analyses. For example, it establishes that it is legitimate to study man in his social situation (and in philosophical problems related to his social situation). Nothing in this doctrine

can usefully be used in the analyses themselves. The second doctrine, however, is used, together with actually-existing social relations, to explicate particular social situations. It is clear that my analysis above of the priority of social relations is concerned with Marx's doctrine of 'the essence of man'.

The distinctness of the two doctrines can be brought out by considering their normative uses. 'Man's essence' has none, though it might lead our thought in the direction of a good many ethical principles; e.g., that when man's essence appears in history, men should be allowed to build social relations within which they can express it. 'The essence of man', on the other hand, might seem to have a whole revolutionary program implied in it, the logic of this conclusion following some such pattern as, "Men are really social, but the world is anti-social now. Therefore,...." This conclusion is quite mistaken, of course. General truths (such as those making up this doctrine) about men's acts carry no implications for the social relations best fulfilling the potential contained in these acts because any expression of the potential is a demonstration of the truth of the general claim--or the claim is incorrect. For example, men's sociality is expressed as co-operation, yet that co-operation is manifest in the form of competition does not mean that competition is a negation of the general truth that men co-operate. Rather, competition is just another expression of it. In its conceptual sense, 'social', like 'rational' is external to the domain of discourse which it defines. On the other hand, without general truths like those of Marx's doctrine we cannot understand social

conditions either. While sociality, or history's being a human creation, in no way explains competition, we cannot explain it without them either. Without conceiving competition as within its domain(s) of discourse we will misconstrue its nature and be tempted to see it as the mode of economic intercourse, or as an 'eternal' type of all human relations, or as closed to human influence, or whatever. Yet knowing its domain of discourse tells us nothing about the character of competition; at most (and not by itself) this knowledge allows us to correct misconceptions concerning our study of it. As Marx and Engels put it, this knowledge merely facilitates the arrangement of phenomena, so that they, the phenomena, can show us their nature.

The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose.³⁸

Yet these reminders are in themselves perfectly unremarkable truisms:

If one tried to advance theses in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them.³⁹

Marx and Engels were acutely aware of the uses of general, abstract truths in social analysis.

When reality is depicted, philosophy as an independent activity loses its medium of existence. At the most its place can be taken by a conspectus of the general results /i.e.,

³⁸Ibid., Remark 127.

³⁹Ibid., Remark 128. Engels (Dialectics of Nature (Moscow, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1954), p. 91) stands on the threshold of entering into this insight about the nature of dialectics.

the doctrine of the essence of man⁷ which are themselves derived from the consideration of the historical development of men. In themselves and detached from real history, these abstractions have not the least value. They only serve to facilitate the arrangement of historical material, and to indicate the sequence of its separate layers. They do not in the least provide, as does philosophy for contemporary sociology a recipe or scheme. On the contrary, the difficulties only begin when we set about the observation and consideration--the real depiction--of the material....The removal of these difficulties is governed by premises which it is quite impossible to state here, but which only the study of the actual life-process and the activity of the individuals of each epoch will make evident.⁴⁰

From the fact that the study of the historical development of men leads us to 'general results' about men and enables us to see our way through certain problems about these men we may derive two conclusions. First, there is no one, unchanging set of truths about men; the truth about men changes according to their historical situation. And, secondly, the general results at which we can arrive will not provide the premises of a systematic exposition of human existence, because these results are themselves drawn from analyses of human existence. Hence, the human condition can be described

⁴⁰GI, pp. 15-16, (emphasis mine).

The resemblance between Marx's method and Wittgenstein's has been pointed out a number of times already. The general sympathy of the two methods can be made strikingly apparent by substituting 'social relations' for 'grammar' in Wittgenstein's aphorism: "Essence is expressed by grammar." (PI, Remark 371) Wittgenstein's other remarks on essence develop this sympathy. Consider: "The essence is hidden from us": this is the form our problem now assumes. We ask 'What is language?', 'What is a proposition?' And we expect that the answer to these questions is to be given once for all; and independently of any future experience. We are mistaken if we see in...the essence, not something that lies open to view and that has become surveyable by a re-arrangement, but something that lies beneath the surface." (PI, Remark 92) For Marx, the criteria by which we re-arrange are the 'general results' of the philosophical notion of the essence of man. They make man's essence, the historical notion, surveyable and open to view. (Cf., also, PI, Remark 562 ff.)

only piece-meal, by the 'material' analysis of particular situations. Normative judgements about the human condition come from a correct analysis of man's present situation, which, because of the dynamics of social advance discussed earlier in connection with man's essence, is itself revolutionary. As Gramsci succinctly put it, "To Tell the Truth is Revolutionary".⁴¹ Change is not implied by these general truths: To recognize the need for change is merely part of seeing the world honestly.

Marx saw that the way something is conceived depends on the domain of discourse to which we suppose it belongs: "When one speaks of institutionalized objects as private property one thinks he is dealing with something outside of man. When one speaks of them as labour, one has to do immediately with man himself. The new formulation of the problem already involves its solution."⁴² This is the way general truths, conceptual truths, about man help in our study of him. But the matter is not this simple. Up to this point, our analysis of the use of general propositions about man leaves open the possibility that general truths might, as it were, hang in the air, never changing and always ready to be put to use correcting conceptual difficulties in social analysis. In a sense, general truths are constant--they cannot change because they have no content. Precisely this lack of content, however, dictates the reason they

⁴¹Quoted in Colwyn Williamson, "Ideology and the Problem of Knowledge", Inquiry, (in press).

⁴²EPM, p. 82.

cannot be put to work directly even to correct conceptual mistakes. If this appears to conflict with what I have stated already, let me hasten to add that I still believe that general truths in one of their states (i.e., when they are appropriately qualified) have the role which, following Marx, I have assigned them.

The general truths about man summed up in the doctrine of the essence of man are conceptual truths; they are truths about anything we could call human and they define the different domains of discourse concerning human beings. General truths per se are not historical except insofar as the totality of human existence is historical, and for just this reason they are not of any use in social analysis. General truths as such have a purely algebraic significance;⁴³ their concrete content changes from era to era. In the transition from epoch to epoch, men change their vision of human life, and the conceptual domains within which life is articulated change too.

Let me review the distinction between concepts external and internal to a domain of discourse. The claims that 'Descartes is rational' and 'Descartes is irrational' can consistently be asserted together. In fact, the second claim depends on the first for its sense. The notion of man's rationality gives us hints as to a way of arranging phenomena appropriate to this domain of discourse. It is only when we have a set of criteria for rationality that Descartes, a rational man, may be judged irrational. The conceptual proposition directs our attention to a way of arranging phenomena so that we can

⁴³This way of putting the matter is borrowed from Trotsky.

then decide practical questions. I have used the logical pattern of this distinction between external and internal senses to explain the difference between philosophical and historical concepts of essence. And so far I have tried rigorously to keep these concepts apart. Now I am going to relate them.

The claim that conceptual truths can be used to settle practical matters appears to contradict what I have so far said. But the contradiction is merely apparent, because there occurs a mediating process between the conceptual assertion and a decision on some practical question. A conceptual claim, which names a domain of discourse, also takes on a qualifying content; a particular set of criteria are accepted as the ones which satisfy the demands of the conceptual claim. Quite clearly, these criteria are not implied in the conceptual claim itself which is compatible with any human phenomenon; the wildest irrationality is consistent with the conceptual claim that man is rational. It is rather that a specific set of criteria within the domain of discourse become accepted as the fulfillment of the general conceptual truth. The reasons behind different sets of criteria can have nothing to do with the truths themselves; but they are related to the same 'inner general laws'⁴⁴ which shape man's essence and which thus govern the movement of history. Before a period of social revolution, it is the newly-created reinterpretation of human existence expressed in man's essence which gives content to general truths; after a revolution, the new form

⁴⁴Engels' phrase (Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy, SW, Vol. II, p. 391.).

of human action becomes expressed in actual social relations, and these relations also appear in the form of ideals which are seen as the concrete fulfillment of the meaning of the general concept. Among these historically-qualified general concepts are: rationality, justice and freedom. Because their concrete meaning changes from era to era I shall call them developing constants.

Although we wish to explain the nature of general truths, it is not correct to begin our account with general truths themselves. Particular historical situations can take up a status vis-à-vis general truths because general truths arise from the totality of particular situations. Both the general truth and concepts internal to its domain of discourse arise together; the general truth defines the domain but the content of the general truth is a result of what is within the domain. In fact, the two sides are inseparable.

This raises two important points, one about the nature of general truths and one about their uses. Quite clearly the nature of qualified general truths changes from era to era; man's sociality or rationality is something quite different to the Greeks and to contemporary capitalists. But it might be tempting to see under this flux a continuity, a true constant, or to argue that we and the Greeks held the same notion of rationality or sociality at least in a general way. It is important for the correct analytic uses of general truths that this temptation should not be sanctioned. If, for example, 'sociality' names a domain of discourse, it might be asked whether this sociality is the same notion as the Greeks had,

at the level of purest abstraction. This question cannot be answered, for as soon as we attempt to examine it, we import into the examination our notions of sociality and thus remove the possibility of meaningful alternatives. That is to say, we can never settle whether or not we have the same general notion of sociality as the Greeks because our different qualified notions prevent us from 'objectively' examining the question.

This indeterminacy might prove distressing if we tend to the notion that intellectual history has developed on one framework, or that men are tending towards the concrete achievement of one set of ideals which they have always (secretly) held. Hegel, for example, has been accused of holding a theory similar to this latter view. Human life is, of course, conceived through some fairly continuous abstract concepts or we would not call the span of human existence human existence. But the continuity of concepts does not imply a unity of meaning throughout the continuity; no truths having one meaning throughout history need be posited to explain it. A concept of developing constants does all that is required. Concepts about man are continuous because each development in their meaning arises out of and hence is related to the meanings previous to it. There is an historical resemblance between each two successive meanings.⁴⁵

⁴⁵Cf. Wittgenstein's notion of the family resemblances between language games. (PI, Remark 68)

To see the conceptual constants which articulate the continuity of human existence either as abstractions which cannot be shown to be constants, or as concepts the meaning of which is historically qualified, is to see that the uses of these constants must be carefully controlled. It would be naive to hold up a Greek ideal of rationality (or, worse still, an ahistorically-conceived ideal) as the substance of a criticism pointing out, say, lack of appreciation for man's rationality manifested by a bad argument. Because unqualified conceptual truths about man (e.g., that he is social) cannot be given a definite logical status and in any case are too abstract to have any force for or against any opinion about men, social analysis must use historically qualified general truths if it is to use general truths at all. What qualifies these truths are the 'conventions' of each age concerning their meaning, conventions directly related to the qualitative changes in the form of life summarized by Marx's doctrine of 'man's essence'. One can say of these 'rules' of analysis and the projects of an epoch what Wittgenstein says about the rules of grammar and the aims of language: "The rules of grammar may be called "arbitrary", if that is to mean that the aim of grammar is nothing but that of the language."⁴⁶ It is not meaningful to call the conventions which qualify conceptual truths about men arbitrary.⁴⁷

⁴⁶Wittgenstein, PI, Remark 497.

⁴⁷The arbitrariness of Marxist standards is an interesting problem. It receives a more complete treatment than here in the last chapter of this essay.

Both the conceptual framework within which analysis proceeds and the phenomena with which it deals are given their shape by the age in which the analyst lives. Hence analysis is always piecemeal and can never achieve universal and unchangeably-true conclusions. Furthermore, analysis always uses nothing but the phenomena before the analyst, and can never rest on the authority of conceptual truths applicable to more than one historical era. Even if conceptual truths exist in a state of unchanging purity when they are nothing but the external name for a domain of discourse (and we have seen that this can neither be proved nor disproved), they quite clearly are not unchanging when they are capable of being used in social analysis.

Furthermore, even historically-qualified conceptual truths cannot enter into the analysis of particular social situations. If, for example, I were to criticize someone's arguments by claiming that he made men out to be irrational, I might be claiming that he misused the domain of discourse of rationality, or that he is not sufficiently aware of the capacity of men right now for rationality, but I am not claiming that he holds that men are irrational because this is a contradiction. Similarly with Marx's claim that individualism does not allow for the social nature of man. What this means is that individualism mistakes the way men now act or the way they should or could act. In both examples, the correction consists in either calling to mind something perfectly obvious to both the corrected and corrector, or in calling into account new facts in an especially striking way. The correction uses reminders or hints at

weaknesses, and thus cannot enter into the corrected analysis itself. The significance of a hint or a reminder changes as the phenomena at which it is aimed change. Hence if conceptual truths are used as hints or reminders, their meaning will change as the phenomena change, and this is yet another way in which they are historically qualified and in which we can use them sensibly only in their historically qualified forms.

Marx himself is occasionally confused in his use of general or conceptual truths about men. At times he uses them correctly, fully aware of the historical boundaries of this analytic stratagem. But at other times he uses conceptual truths as if they were eternal verities, so clear and firmly established that no man should have missed taking them into account. That is to say, he tries to use general truths as if they were in their most abstract form, had one constant meaning and were historically qualified all at once. This confusion is an important one because it has led to the ahistoricity which plagues a whole school of contemporary marxist thought.⁴⁸

Conceptual truths about men, then, have no role in social analysis unless they are qualified by the conventions of life of an historical era. Thus qualified (a process that happens naturally, and from which we must abstract the unqualified form), these truths

⁴⁸The school of marxist humanism which holds that Marx had a utopian vision of the capacity of each man for good, a vision based, not on an analysis of post-Renaissance society, but, one can only conclude, on sentiment. Erich Fromm is the best-known exponent of this sort of 'marxism'.

can be used as reminders whose function is to remove the facade of soundness from mistaken analyses and indicate the direction a correct account should take. Absolute truth cannot be reached; the most analysis can provide is a collection of truths concerning one age.

D. The Tendency to Absolutism in Marx's Historical Analysis

Because this unmetaphysical account of Marx runs counter to the claims of the great majority of his interpreters, including some of the best of them, let me close this chapter with some remarks on the ways in which Marx is and is not absolutist in his doctrine of social development.

Using the example of competition, let me epitomize Marx's approach to social phenomena. Competition, he would want to say, is not inherently evil, but it is superannuated. Human productive forces, being self-creative, have developed new possibilities which cannot be expressed through bourgeois social relations. Competition, that is to say, is not inherently inhuman; it is just inhuman now. This pattern of analysis is definitely anti-absolutist.

By suggesting that the truly human society of freely associating individuals, communism, will be achieved, however, Marx seems to commit just the absolutist--and moralistic--fallacy that I have shown above he repudiates. He seems to be suggesting that human beings can overcome the 'evil' of development, of corrosive negation

of everything fixed and stable;⁴⁹ that their needs and acts can cease changing in form so that one final set of social relationships will result. It is an open question as to whether Marx made any such claim; but even if he did, he based his claim on a particular analysis of a particular social order, bourgeois society, and not on implications drawn from supposed metaphysical truths. He and Engels anticipated the charge of absolutism and ably defended themselves:

Communism is not for us a stable state which is to be established, an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence.⁵⁰

Marx is claiming that because of conditions unique to capitalism (it radically dichotomizes society into the rich and the poor, and men into their essential person and what is 'accidental' to them),

⁴⁹I have taken the word 'evil' from a passage in Engels' Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy. Although not directly relevant to my argument, the passage has so much intrinsic interest that I shall quote it: "One believes one is saying something great," Hegel remarks, 'if one says that "man is naturally good". But one forgets that one says something far greater when one says "man is naturally evil".' With Hegel evil is the form in which the motive force of historical development presents itself. This contains the twofold meaning that, on the one hand, each advance necessarily appears as a sacrilege against things hallowed, as a rebellion against customs; and that on the other hand, it is precisely the wicked passions of men--greed and lust for power--which, since the emergence of class antagonism, serve as levers of historical development--a fact of which the history of feudalism and of the bourgeois, for example, constitute a single continual proof." (Engels, loc. cit., pp. 381-382)

⁵⁰GI, p. 26.

a total revolution is in store. And because of the new productive capacities developed within, but superannuating, bourgeois social relations, this revolution holds out the hope of achieving a society of free men.

The bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production--antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism, but of one arising from the social conditions of life of the individuals; at the same time the productive forces developing in the womb of bourgeois society create the material conditions for the solution of that antagonism. This social formation, therefore, brings the prehistory of human society to a close.⁵¹

If Marx believed in an absolute transformation of human society (a transformation so complete that even materialist methods of social analysis would no longer be cogent), he believed it because of a particular analysis of bourgeois society, and not because of any abstract metaphysical convictions.

No matter how completely Marx based his belief in the coming of the millenium on his analysis of concrete social conditions, he was probably mistaken. The USSR offers a practical example of how little necessary it is that men follow through the potential contained in socialist material relations. And Engels offers an incisive philosophical objection to Marx's hopes just by stating the nature of Marx's own philosophical device, dialectic.

All successive historical systems are only transitory stages in the endless course of development of human society from the lower to the higher. Each stage is necessary, and therefore justified for the time and conditions to which it owes

⁵¹Karl Marx, Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, SW, Vol. I, p. 329.

its origin. But in the face of new, higher conditions which gradually develop in its own womb, it loses its validity and justification. It must give way to a higher stage which will also in its turn decay and perish. Just as the bourgeoisie by large-scale industry, competition and the world market dissolves in practice all stable and time-honoured institutions, so this dialectical philosophy dissolves all concepts of final, absolute truth and of absolute states of humanity corresponding to it. For it (dialectical philosophy) nothing is final, absolute, sacred. It reveals the transitory character of everything and in everything; nothing can endure before it except the uninterrupted process of becoming and passing away, of endless ascendancy from the lower to the higher....Dialectical philosophy has, of course, a conservative side: it recognizes that definite stages of knowledge and society are justified for their time and circumstances, but only so far. The conservative side of this mode of outlook is relative; its revolutionary character is absolute--the only absolute dialectical philosophy admits.⁵²

On the other hand, since the achievement of a communist society would be the end of at least the dialectic of class struggle as a cogent method of analysing society, who can say what and whether such a society might be? To be a philosopher is, if nothing else, to see that one cannot be a prophet.

Conclusion

The method which I earlier called the stratagem of tautology (which we now understand to be developing conceptual constants about man) can be applied to the problem of freedom. 'Freedom' is a developing constant. In the late medieval period, it meant the ability to live out of serfdom, by selling labour to the highest bidder. Now, of course, it means the liberty to avoid doing just that. The

⁵²Engels, op. cit., pp. 362-363.

changing meanings of freedom are closely linked to the changing meaning of 'man's essence' in its different historical appearances.

The propositions of Marx's doctrine of the 'essence of man', his conceptual doctrine of essence, cannot be used in solving or understanding social problems directly, but they can give us hints as to how to dissolve pseudo-problems. The philosophical problem of freedom is such a pseudo-problem. By using Marx's first or philosophical doctrine to show that freedom is not a conceptual problem about man, we also see that the real problems of freedom are historical and practical--i.e., that they concern the second doctrine of essence, the forms of human activity in various eras of history.

CHAPTER II

SOCIAL RELATIONS AND INDIVIDUAL MEN

Introduction

In the previous chapter we considered the question of the essence of man from the standpoint of men collectively, society. Social relations, we saw, show us how to solve the mystery of social change. Now, approaching from the standpoint of individual men as members of society, we must try to discover in what sense it is true that social relations form human beings. To do this is to clarify the logic of Marx's second notion of essence, which I have called 'man's essence', and it is also to see the point of saying, as I wish to say, that historical periods manifest a 'characteristic consciousness'.

I claimed in the previous chapter that human existence is of a piece, and by this is meant that the fundamental misconceptions with which we are dealing have, in large measure, been produced by a rigid insistence on certain dichotomies which erroneously separate various aspects of human existence. For example, many philosophers have argued for or presupposed a rigid distinction between mind and body, or spirit and matter at the level of society, a division which is either reflected in or the result of a similar division between mind and body at the level of the individual person. And this kind of distinction has, in turn, facilitated the supposed split between the individual's 'private' mind and the so-called

'external world', or between the Individual and Society. It is in these dichotomies when intransigently held that I think we find the roots of the whole view to which I am opposed. Although this chapter is an attack on these dichotomies, I do not deal with them exhaustively. Instead, I try to create a picture of human activity which will take the philosophic sting out of all such dichotomies.

When I say that an age manifests a 'characteristic consciousness', I mean to suggest that there is to be found in any given historical period a unified set of intentions towards man and nature, a unified set of fundamental beliefs and attitudes which make up one Weltanschauung which shapes and is shaped by all the actions of the men of that epoch. Men create, make concrete, and live out a single interpretation of reality in each historical period, and it is because of this that we can speak of them manifesting a 'characteristic consciousness'. In order to clarify this claim, I have found it helpful to introduce a concept of institutionalization. I shall argue that all sensuous objects are institutionalized and that the unsensuous is formed (in the relevant way) by the sensuous. Men too are institutionalized; I shall argue that man can be nothing but what he is for other people (again, in the relevant sense): "as individuals express their lives, so they are".⁵³ From these arguments I conclude that man is formed by social relations. In the process of establishing these conclusions, it will become clear

⁵³GI, p. 7.

that the social relations which form men fall into basic sets, and this in turn will further explain what I mean by the 'characteristic consciousness' of an age.

A. Institutionalization

Every object of man's attention is institutionalized. That is to say, it has a legal status, its use is governed by customs, habits and attitudes, its appearance is a function of conventions concerning beauty, utility, value, and so on. Institutions are man-made. Using value as an example, Marx points out their formative power: "It is value that converts every product into a social hieroglyph..."⁵⁴ into a commodity. Or, to take another of Marx's examples of institutionalization, consider what bread is for a starving man without money: it is forbidden, illegal, etc., and yet it also appears as 'food', as an object without unique qualities, an object seen only as a way of satisfying a general and irresistible desire.

For the starving man, it is not the human form of food that exists, but only its abstract being as food; it could just as well be there in its crudest form, and it would be impossible to say wherein this feeding activity differs from that of animals.⁵⁵

For a full, happy person with money, on the other hand, the bread has many unique qualities depending on the sort of bread it is, and it fits uniquely into a very complex project, this person's life.

⁵⁴Marx, Capital, (Moscow, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), Vol. 1, p. 74.

⁵⁵Marx, EPM, p. 109.

The contrast between the two breads--the one the starving man sees and the one the other man sees--could not be more striking, and these forms depend entirely on the historical institutions which form the bread and within which the two men live. Because many thinkers ignored these fairly obvious observations and asserted the independence of physical objects, Marx was moved to say:

The reality which communism is creating is precisely the real basis for rendering it impossible that everything should exist independently of individuals, insofar as things are only the product of the preceding intercourse of individuals themselves.⁵⁶

Objects, then, are just accumulated subjectivities. "The product of labour is labour which has become congealed in an object, which has become material: it is the objectification of labour."⁵⁷ The key to understanding Marx's notion of nature is to see it as created, as given the status and shape it has, by men. This is what he means when he exhorts us to see the 'human essence' of nature and also, in this sense, the natural essence of man.

It is a mistake to suppose that according to Marx man is just a carbon-copy, an epiphenomenal product of the physical world or of history. But it is just as mistaken to suppose that man can do anything he sets his mind to. A man can act in terms of nothing which does not influence him in some way--and every such thing is itself institutionalized by laws, customs, beliefs, etc. These institutions,

⁵⁶Marx, GI, p. 70.

⁵⁷Marx, EPM, p. 69.

quite naturally and without the person being aware of its happening, implant themselves in the actions of the person. What begins as an external limitation becomes an internal one too. In the same sense in which objects are accumulated subjectivity, subjects are accumulated objectivity. If individuals are what they express in their lives, then they must be what they are allowed to express. The whole history of the human race affects each man's acts. Men do make their own history:

...but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the dead. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.⁵⁸

Institutions determine the nature of objects at any given time and place. Institutions, however, are just the expression, the detailed working out, of social relations. To give an object of utility value or any other institution "is just as much a social product as is language".⁵⁹

Language and man's senses are both institutionalized. This is clear in the case of language, and Marx frequently cites language when he wants an example of an institutionalized human activity.⁶⁰

⁵⁸Marx, The 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon, SW, Vol. I, p. 225.

⁵⁹Marx, Capital, Vol. I, p. 74.

⁶⁰It is interesting to note that Protagoras, if we are to rely on Plato's dialogue, cites the Greek language as a method of explaining what he means when he is arguing for--in our terms--the institutional character of morality.

The vocabulary men use is roughly the same for a broad group of languages (i.e., the Western European Languages) and the words of this vocabulary are clearly the vehicles of all manner of institutions and conventions. That the senses are institutionalized, however, might not be so apparent.

The work of the senses depends on a great many things: what the knower knows how to perceive, what the objects of perception offer to a particular perceiver, the intentions of the perceiver towards this object and towards sensuous existence in general, and so on. From day to day the work of the senses varies according to the varying projects of the perceiver. This is not the case over a period of time, however. The small differences are submerged in the deeper continuity. Senses will not function unless the perceiver has reasons for them to function and the reasons, as we saw earlier, will depend on the institutions of the perceiver's society.

For the starving man, it is not the human form of food that exists....The care-burdened man in need has no sense for the finest play; the dealer in minerals sees only the mercantile value but not the beauty and unique nature of the mineral: he has no mineralogical sense.⁶¹

Or, to take another example:

The sensuous consciousness of the fetish-worshipper [the man in love with money] is different from that of the Greek, because his sensuous existence is different.⁶²

Marx treats this phenomenon synecdochically by saying that it is

⁶¹Marx, EPM, p. 109.

⁶²Ibid., p. 123.

eyes that can or cannot see beauty, ears that can or cannot hear music. In the cases above, the social relations of the men mentioned have radically circumscribed what their senses can perceive. In general, "The forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present."⁶³

Because nature and society are human creations and because each man begins forming his unique viewpoint from his experience of social phenomena (and this includes, of course, natural phenomena) each man begins seeing the world as thousands of other men and groups of men have seen it. Experience is shared experience. In Marx's time, however, objects of sense were not worth sharing and the activity of the senses could not often be shared--a striking manifestation, for Marx, of the extent to which men were alienated and dehumanized.

Implied in Marx's criticism of the state of senses in his time is the standard he most often uses (or presupposes) in his condemnations of unsatisfactory conditions, the standard of the truly human life. It would be premature to develop the meaning of this standard here, but it can be said that the quest for a truly human life and society is man's essence in our era manifesting itself.

Marx's use of this standard is a further expression of his tendency⁶⁴ to use historical standards of criticism as if they were

⁶³Marx, EPM, p. 108.

⁶⁴See Chapter II, Part C.

ahistorical. When Marx uses the notion of man's potential 'true humanity' as though he was using the ideals implied in his era to criticize his era, he is on sound ground. The notions of man's humanity, of humaneness, of equality and decency which support Marx's notion of 'true humanity' are all post-Renaissance notions arising from bourgeois social relations and depending on the notion of equality which arose with the ideal of free labour: i.e., labour in which every man is equally free to sell himself to the highest bidder. (In a society such as feudalism, in which social classes are ordained by God, notions of humanity based on the equal worth of each individual would be incomprehensible.) There are concepts implicit in the ideal of a truly human life (e.g., the nature of true sociality, or, that all experience is shared experience) which, without the different specific content given them by successive appearances of man's essence, apply equally to any concept of human life. Marx sometimes uses these concepts as if they were eternal verities, which, by virtue of their eternal value, can be used as especially vigorous excoriations of present conditions. It is unlikely that we could ever sensibly use entirely ahistorical standards as measuring-rods for historical events, but even if we could, the ones Marx requires do not exist. To use ideals of sociality, of truly shared experience, of free activity, or of any other truly human ideals legitimately, we must use them aware of the historical nature of their content. What Marx occasionally fails to make sufficiently plain is that the criteria which he uses to condemn mature

capitalism themselves depend on the social relations of bourgeois capitalism.

But to return to Marx's account of the senses: 'truly human' senses could actually come into being only when the objective world manifests the "objectively unfolding richness of man's essential being";⁶⁵ i.e., only when the objective world is truly human too. Truly human senses appropriate the value in objects in a wide variety of ways and for many different reasons; in Marx's time, possession was the only important mode of taking onto oneself the value of an object:

Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only ours when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc.--in short, when it is used by us.⁶⁶

In place of a rich diversity of ways of perceiving an object, "... there has therefore come the sheer estrangement of all these senses--the sense of having".⁶⁷ Every possible object of sense has become just a commodity. The only way one can appropriate a painting is to own it--perhaps the least fruitful of all possible ways. Man's senses, this shows us, are completely institutionalized.

B. Individuals

A man expresses himself for other men through his acts. These acts are institutionalized first negatively; the only acts which

⁶⁵Marx, EPM, p. 108.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 106.

⁶⁷Loc. cit.

occur are those permitted by the institutions of a society. The intentions and projects of the actor are also institutionalized, as we have seen, positively or directly, because the tools used to formulate them, the senses and language, are institutionalized. That is to say, man as he appears to others is institutionalized--partly because the men to whom he appears are institutionalized and partly because he himself is. Because institutions are concretions of social relations, we can say that social relations shape how men appear to other men.

If I can show that men are as they appear to others, then I can conclude that social relations form individual men. Not least among the problems of this endeavour is this: it appears that the nature of the 'others' will differ from person to person, or, to put the same point another way, that any similarities among all the observers (thus of necessity including the observed in every case but his own) are bound to be so general as to be unhelpful. In either case, what is important in human nature appears to vary wildly from moment to moment.

That this dilemma takes the form of contradictories both of which are true is the key to dissolving it. The dilemma depends on the generality with which the alternatives are stated. If there are similarities among a given group of possible observers of a human being, they need to be too general to be helpful (hence rendering what is helpful capriciously different in every observer) only if they must be exactly the same in each observer. In fact, men are

variations, varying particularizations, of the homogeneous forces which allow us to identify their group as a group. In some contexts the sameness among them can be emphasized, in others their individual uniqueness. Both, however, are just different sides of the same coin. That they must be analysed from the point of view of the similarities, that the individual uniqueness must be seen as variations on one set of social conditions, renders the uniqueness no less unique. Marx makes this point in a passage seemingly open to quite different translations. A comparison of the Marxist-Leninist Institute version (translated by Martin Milligan) with the translation of T. B. Bottomore is interesting (Mr. Bottomore's translation is bracketed in the last three lines):

Man, much as he may be a particular individual (and it is precisely this particularity which makes him an individual, and a real individual social being), is just as much the totality,...the subjective existence of thought and experienced society presents for itself; just as he exists in the real world as the awareness [representation] and the real enjoyment [real mind] of social existence, and as a totality [sum of human manifestation] of human life-activity [life].⁶⁸

Engels suggests that history, human society, is governed by 'inner general laws'.⁶⁹ If these laws exist, however, they do not have an existence separate from individual men. If there is a relation of exploitation between workers and owners, this relation is found, not independently, but in workers and owners, in individual men. We can

⁶⁸Marx, EPM, p. 105.

⁶⁹Engels, Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy, p. 391.

approach individuals from two points of view: as men-taken-as-individuals and as men-taken-as-groups. Individuals-as-individuals show us, Marx wants to say, the elements of the process, the active factors of consciousness (awareness), of enjoyment, of suffering. Men taken as groups show us the workings of the general laws, which often work independently of individuals' consciousness but which could not exist were man not conscious (as, on the other hand, the fact and the particular form of awareness of enjoyment depends on the general laws). Even though men do not understand history, "Nothing happens without a conscious purpose, without an intended end."⁷⁰ Marx makes it clear that the process is a process of interacting individuals. Bottomore, on the other hand, translates Marx in such a way that Marx seems to assert that men are merely representations, manifestations of the process, that they stand outside the process. Bottomore makes individual men out to be epiphenomena, not the substance, of the process. This is why he says they are a human manifestation of life, when in fact the word human is clearly redundant. In a sense men do represent the process, society, but only because they are the process. Each man, in principle, is a complete presentation of the process because he is indispensably integral to it. Bottomore introduces through his translation of Marx precisely the individual-and-society distinction which Marx repudiates.

/Society/ thus becomes, like truth, a separate entity, a metaphysical subject of which the real human individuals are mere representations.⁷¹

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Marx, "The Revealed 'Standpoint' Mystery", HF, p. 254.

That men are all integrated into one society through 'sharing' its institutions does not mean that men are all the same, but only that they can be rationally related to one another and that a certain collection of them make up an identifiable whole (a class, historical period, or whatever). Neither, however, does the resolution of my dilemma demand that men all have the same way of looking at other men. It merely demands that a group of men be able, in principle, to reach agreement on what another man is. And this is clearly possible, if sometimes difficult to achieve; the standards by which men judge are social standards.⁷² Of course, disagreements arise. But disagreements can, in principle, be settled. The problem of disagreement is essentially a practical problem. The fact that individuals vary in the way they observe presents no theoretical problems affecting my claim that men are as they seem to other men.

When Marx argues that 'as individuals express their lives, so they are' he is making both a philosophical and a polemical point. The polemical point is important, though its importance will not become clear until the next chapter: Men really express their lives in their actions despite and often in opposition to what they themselves think or declare concerning the meaning of their acts. In other words, if we wish to understand men, it is to their acts, and not to their conscious opinions about these acts, that we must turn.

⁷²As Peter Winch shows in his book, The Idea of a Social Science, p. 33.

We must look at men as they appear to other people and not as they appear to themselves if we are to understand their real character. Marx asserts his doctrine against those who fail to make a distinction between consciousness as a creative force in history and consciousness as conscious opinion of men. Now let us consider an example of the doctrine's philosophical meaning: (Marx is criticizing the approach to women of primitive communism, an approach which changes women from individual private property into communal private property.)

In the approach to women as the spoil and handmaid of communal lust is expressed the infinite degradation in which man exists for himself, for the secret of this approach has its unambiguous, decisive, plain and undisguised expression in the relation of man to woman and in the manner in which the direct and natural procreative relationship is conceived.⁷³

The real nature of primitive communism is manifest to us in the way its people acted, and specifically in the way they conceived of women. Marx clearly has no intention of 'reducing' the possibilities of human personality to an over-simplified 'what is expressed'. And in any case expressions are more than just symptoms of what they express. Expressions could be merely symptoms of something else only if there were a clear division between the expression and what it expresses. This is clearly not the case in examples like the one quoted. Part of what it is to be 'infinitely degraded', for example, is to treat people as not human; hence from one instance of it, the vicious treatment of sexual objects, we can read the whole of the

⁷³Marx, EPM, p. 99.

degradation. This shows us how we must conceive of men's expressing their lives: men are not the same as their acts; rather, they express their character in their acts--and how else could they express it?

C. Man's Sociality

How else indeed. Various thinkers in Marx's time (and in ours) thought that a man's character is contained in his secret ideas, in his conscious opinions. From some points of view this is correct, but from the point of view of man as the substance of society, Marx believed it to be mistaken. (It is necessary to qualify Marx's claim. Only when conscious opinions conflict with actions are actions more the expressors of man's real character. When the two are in harmony, thoughts can be treated as what they are, as actions, and the distinction disappears.) These thinkers thought individual men to be first contemplators, outside of and indifferent to the process of society and only secondly and by their own choice, as it were, actors in society. Feuerbach held this view:

...he never manages to conceive the sensuous world as the total living sensuous activity of the individuals composing it; and therefore...⁷⁴

The human essence, with Feuerbach, can be comprehended only as 'genus', as an internal, dumb generality which merely naturally unites the many individuals.⁷⁵

⁷⁴Marx, GI, p. 37.

⁷⁵Marx, Theses on Feuerbach, Thesis VI.

Marx applied this criticism to Hegel as well. Hegel's Absolute Spirit, Marx thought, merely linked individuals, the individuals themselves having no effect on the movements of the Absolute Spirit. And I aimed just this criticism at Bottomore's translation.

Communism differs from all previous movements in that it overturns the basis of all earlier relations of production and intercourse, and for the first time consciously treats all natural premises as the creatures of men, strips them of their natural character and subjugates them to the power of individuals united.⁷⁶

Objects, as we have seen, are accumulated subjectivity, which is to say, paradoxically, that human activity is objective: i.e., efficacious, complete and knowable as it appears in the natural world. If contemplation were the defining or specifically human form of human activity (as with Feuerbach, for example), then a clear distinction could be drawn between thoughts (the human or subjective part of the world) and things (dead, inert, separated from the humanness of human nature). This is what Lukacs calls the problem of objectification: the world appears as 'object', minds as 'subject' and the means of their joining a mystery. But "even when, as with Bauer, the world of sense is reduced to a minimum, to a stick, it presupposes the action of producing the stick."⁷⁷ The mystery dissolves if we see men first as actors, and then, when they collectively have produced something which requires thought, as thinkers. Men's activity is first 'sensuous activity, practice',

⁷⁶Marx, GI, p. 70.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 16.

and only then does it appear 'in the form of contemplation'.⁷⁸ By seeing physical objects as mindless, theorists are led to see other men (since they are nothing but physical objects to me, whatever they may be to themselves) as beings the existence of whose minds can never be demonstrated. From the standpoint of coming to know it, thought is as objective, as sensuous, as anything else, because thought is embodied in the acts which make the world. Human physical activity is both physical and mental; without either it ceases to be. The distinction between thinking and acting is conceptual and not quasi-spatial. "Thinking and being are no doubt distinct but at the same time they are also in unity with each other."⁷⁹

The untenability of the mind-body distinction also extends to the mind-world or individual-and-society distinction, and for at least two reasons: first, men's acts are objective--there is no external, mindless objectivity; and secondly, men's lives are inseparably intermingled.

Marx's way of pointing out the objective character of human action is to say that subjectivity is but an aspect of objectivity:

Whenever real, corporeal man, man with his feet firmly on the solid ground,...establishes his real, objective, essential powers [by acting on objects], it is not the act of positing which is the subject in this process: it is the subjectivity of objective essential powers, whose action... must also be something objective....[Man] creates or estab-

⁷⁸Marx, Theses on Feuerbach, Thesis I.

⁷⁹Marx, EPM, p. 105.

lishes only objects, because he is established by objects--
because at bottom he is nature.⁸⁰

Acts are objective and subjectivity is part of objectivity. Hence a man is his acts. His objectivity is established through noticing that he creates and is created by the real world. Though both objectivity and subjectivity characterize every act, acts congeal in objects as objectivity; this is the real meaning of the half-truth 'objects are accumulated subjectivity'. Because men make nature, because objects are congealed human activity and thought, the notion that physical things are 'external and mindless' is mistaken. Furthermore, objects express the character of the men who make them:

We have seen how...man produces man--himself and the other man; how the object, being the direct embodiment of his individuality, is simultaneously his own existence for the other man, the existence of the other man, and that existence for him. Thus the social character is the general character of the whole movement; just as society itself produces man as man, so is society produced by him.⁸¹

A man's character is contained in his acts and objects are human creations. Consequently there is no deep distinction in kind between individual men and their world, be it social or natural.

Furthermore, individuals' lives are completely intermingled with the life of their society; any separation is a posterior development and is always in terms of the interpenetration. Both the intermingling and the separation are seen in man's emotions:
"The dominion of the objective being [society] in me, which is the

⁸⁰Ibid., pp. 155-156.

⁸¹Ibid., pp. 103-104.

sensuous outburst of my essential activity, is emotion, which thus becomes here the activity of my being."⁸² The active expression of the state of society, man's collective life, is the emotions of individual men; and emotions also reveal the state of the interaction of each individual with the others: "A being which has no object outside itself is not objective."⁸³ A man's life, then, is inseparably intermingled with, is a variation of, the social process. And 'society', man's collective life, can be nothing but commonalities manifest in a number of men.

What is to be avoided above all is the...establishing of 'Society' as an abstraction vis-à-vis the individual. The individual is the social being. His life, even if it may not appear in the direct form of a communal life carried out together with others--is therefore an expression and confirmation of social life. Man's individual and species life are not different, however much--and this is inevitable--the mode of existence of the individual is a more particular, or a more general, mode of the life of the species, or the life of the species is a more particular or more general individual life.⁸⁴

Thus society is the consummated oneness in substance of man and nature--the true resurrection of nature--the naturalism of man and the humanism of nature both brought to fulfillment.⁸⁵

How thoroughly each individual is intermingled with the 'mind' of his sociates is demonstrated by language. "Language, like con-

⁸²Ibid., p. 112.

⁸³Ibid., p. 157.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 105.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 104.

sciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men....Language is practical consciousness, as it exists for other men."⁸⁶ Thoughts, which I have claimed are objective, are the content of language; in this context, to be objective is to be public and knowable. Some thoughts, of course, do have a genuinely non-public life. But they are formulated in language (they are the sort of things with which we can argue, which we can deny, prove, revise, clarify, etc., though in the case of private thoughts, only the person thinking can do these things); thus they are potentially expressed, even if they are actually suppressed. Standards also are evidence of the degree to which men are in many respects a particular expression of their society.

It makes no sense to suppose anyone capable of establishing a purely personal standard of behaviour if he had never had any experience of human society with its socially established rules.⁸⁷

Conclusion

In brief, then, both the distinction between minds and acts (or minds and bodies) and the distinction between individuals and the world are conceptual distinctions within one thing; neither is a physical distinction except incidentally. In neither case is the distinction any help in maintaining the sort of individual-and-society split which is so important to theories of individualism

⁸⁶Marx, CI, p. 19.

⁸⁷Peter Winch, op. cit., p. 33.

and to the problem of social determinism. Robinson Crusoe-ism, as Marx often pointed out,⁸⁸ is incomprehensible. A man's life is a variation of the life of his society and his standards are a variation of his society's, even if the variation amounts to a complete negation. Privacy, unique to human beings though it may be, must at all costs not be elevated to the status of an epistemological first principle. To be is to be public. To be public is, as we have seen, to determine and be determined by institutions, and that is to say, by social relations. Man, it can now be said, is formed by social relations.

To act publicly is to act with other men. And it is men acting together who form social groups, the identity of which may be based on ethnic unity, class cohesiveness and so on. The identity may be that of an historical period, also, which is why we speak of 'characteristic consciousness'. Because these unities are prior to any given individual, they shape individuals; hence individuals appear as variations of them. But individuals also shape the groups in which they live--sometimes, as during revolutions, quite dramatically.

⁸⁸See, for example, "The Fetishism of Commodities", Capital, Vol. 1, p. 76.

CHAPTER III

CONSCIOUSNESS AND LIFE

Introduction

Men create their history, their societies and thus themselves, yet it would be absurd to claim that history follows the content of men's consciously-conceived projects. If men's conscious plans are not expressed in the pattern of historical events, however, it is not clear what the logic of this pattern is. It is not possible in this essay to sort out such a complex issue, but a few distinctions concerning the role of consciousness in history-building must be drawn. By doing so, we will be closer to seeing the significance of saying that eras manifest a 'characteristic consciousness' and also to understanding in what sense Marx might be called a social determinist.

A. Consciousness and History: THE STRATAGEM OF INSIGHTFUL FALSEHOOD

"Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life."⁸⁹ Probably no statement Marx made has been more misinterpreted than this one. It is taken, in the most usual misinterpretation, to be a particularly clear statement of the claim that men are historically determined and hence that they are unfree. But this is to miss the polemical and methodological significance of the state-

⁸⁹Marx, GI, p. 15.

ment; and it is also to see in it an absolute, dogmatic significance that Marx himself would have found quite incomprehensible.

The general tendency of Marx's thought was away from asserting things as absolutely true. To do so would have been, for him, a betrayal of what he took dialectics to tell us about the nature of truth.⁹⁰ No longer, he thought, can we conceive of truth as something to be established once and for all; rather it is something which changes from era to era. This is a fortiori the case with assertions about the human condition. What was true for the Greeks about man is no longer true in our time. The nearest one can come to achieving absolute truth, Marx believed, was to hit on a true method, a right approach, to problems of man--and this is not very near. The right method will yield truths when used ingeniously on particular problems, but it will not yield truth. Hence to see Marxist aphorisms as absolute statements of doctrine is a priori almost certainly mistaken.⁹¹

The statement 'life is not determined by consciousness but consciousness by life' must be seen in its polemical situation. Men have consciously-held opinions and history is nothing but the history of human activity; but it would be a mistake to conclude that consciously-held opinions are the principal moving force of history, whether or not these opinions comprehend the effect they have on

⁹⁰Cf., e.g., Engels, "Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy", (op. cit.) p. 363.

⁹¹We have already seen the way in which this is applicable to that other famous aphorism, 'the essence of man is social relations'.

history. The polemic of Marx's aphorism was directed against a similar view, a perversion of Hegelian absolute idealism according to which the opinions and decisions of great men are the principal force of history.

We must not confuse the role of men in history with the role of consciously-held opinions, either by granting consciously-held opinions too great a role, as above--or by granting men a role not great enough. That men do not understand what they do in history and that the previous acts of other men (society) influence what men do in history does not allow us to deny men, as conscious beings, the function of history-building. This is the mistake made by some critics of Marx who claim that Marx is a doctrinaire opponent of freedom because he is a historical determinist. Marx and Engels repudiate both distortions and answer the charge that they are rigid determinists in one aphorism: "Our conception of history⁷ shows that circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances."⁹² That is to say, men and circumstances interact to form men's actual lives, the lives of which their consciousnesses are a part. This is what Marx and Engels meant when they said that consciousness is a "direct efflux...of material life".⁹³ And these consciousnesses once formed are not without their influence. It is merely their form and not their every function that is determined by life.

⁹²Marx, GI, p. 29.

⁹³Ibid., p. 14.

In the first method of approach the starting-point is consciousness taken as the living individual; in the second it is the real living individuals themselves, as they are in actual life, and consciousness is considered solely as their consciousness.

This approach is not void of premises....Its premises are men...in their actual, empirically perceptible process of development under definite conditions.⁹⁴

The fact of consciousness, if not consciously-held opinion, is of the most profound importance in understanding historical change. The above argument also gives us some insight into how Marx and Engels deal with both crude idealism and crude materialism.

Marx's so-called determinist aphorism on consciousness and life can be objected to on grounds other than moral outrage. Someone might say: 'Consciousness cannot be determined by life because consciousness is part of life. Consciousness is not something outside of life which life can influence; to claim this is to make a simple conceptual mistake. The only correct way of stating the aphorism would be to claim that non-conscious life determines consciousness. This assertion, however, is far less striking--and probably also wrong.'⁹⁵ The soundness of this objection is a most convincing demonstration of the polemical nature of Marx's aphorism. Of course the aphorism is misconceived--and what better way is there of seeing this than to follow through the line of argument concerning consciousness and life to which the aphorism draws our attention? Once we

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 15.

⁹⁵The essence of this objection is taken from John Plamenatz, Man and Society, Vol. 2 (London, Longmans, 1963), pp. 275 ff.

pass beyond it, the aphorism does indeed look silly; it carries within it the means to its own transcendence.

The aphorism above and the claim that objects are accumulated subjectivity are two examples of Marx's stratagem of insightful falsehood. The aim of the consciousness and life aphorism is to destroy the supposed independence of conscious opinion, but in doing so it creates a false causal picture of the relation of consciousness and life. It also stimulates a line of argument which, if followed through, shows the flaws in the causal picture. When fourteen pages later Marx notes that "...circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances" he shows us how important it is that he began with the false claim that life determines consciousness. Now the claim that circumstances and men make each other seems perfectly sensible and even, perhaps, a bit obvious. Without the frame of reference created by the consciousness and life aphorism, however, involving as it does the repudiation of the independence of consciousness, Marx's second claim would seem far less significant. Furthermore, the second aphorism is an implicit denial of the causal model set up by the first.

The claim that objects are accumulated subjectivity is used rather differently. By claiming that objects are subjectivity, we break down the hard distinction between mind and world; mind, we claim, is world and vice versa. But the actual content of the claim is only half correct, and further analysis must be done to reveal the full truth that every human action and every object is both

objective and subjective. In this case, further analysis, instead of destroying the distinction which began it, rectifies an omission in the original claim. In both cases, however, a similar pattern is followed: a claim capable of cracking an opposing opinion's facade of soundness is set up which can only be controlled so long as its supersession is kept constantly in sight.

B. Consciousness and Man's Sociality

Consciousness is an indispensable notion if we are to see what Marx means by claiming that human beings are social. Marx thinks man is social because he is formed by an 'ensemble of social relations',⁹⁶ that is to say, by the results of other individuals' productive activity throughout history. Put this simply, however, this definition of sociality fails to distinguish men-as-social-creatures from inarticulate animals who work together: the species to which animals belong seems to parallel the society in which men have membership, and each animal, like each man, encapsulates the history of its race. Man's unique sociality lies in this: while animals are species-beings only for us, men are species-beings for each other and thence for themselves.⁹⁷ Man, that is to say, is an explicitly species-being.

If the physical world is a human creation and if human acts must be expressed physically (sensuously), then to act is to act

⁹⁶Marx, Theses on Feuerbach, Thesis VI.

⁹⁷Marx, EPM, p. 74. By species-being, Marx means a being whose nature is formed by the species of which he is part.

with other men. A man's acts change other men and others' acts determine a man's life. Men are explicitly species-beings because they consciously act in terms of the fact that they are bound up with other men. That is to say, men are explicitly species-beings because they have some capacity for universality; they can develop, consciously create, projects which involve other men; they take advantage of what they have in common with others of their species. Men have a comprehensiveness of awareness, a "universality which makes all nature man's inorganic body".⁹⁸ Because men plan, they co-operate (animals merely work together). Men are creatures of whom it can sensibly be asserted that eventually they may understand their acts, the reasons for them and the effect they have.

Man's special sociality lies in the fact that he is conscious. The reverse is true too. Man is conscious because he is social; were he not social, he could not be conscious. Language is indispensable to consciousness and "language only arises from the need, the necessity, for intercourse with other men."⁹⁹ The shape it takes on is the shape intercourse with men gives it. Man is an explicit species-being; man is conscious or social only because he is both.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Marx, GI, p. 19.

C. History is a Natural Process

Yet Marx and Engels say that the development of history is a natural process. They mean by this, however, not that consciousness has no role in history's development, but that it has evolved into its present shape independently of the conscious wishes and desires of the men making it. Engels puts the point this way:

In the history of society...the actors are all endowed with consciousness, are men acting with deliberation or passion, working towards definite goals; nothing happens without a conscious purpose, without an intended aim. But this distinction, important as it is for historical investigation, particularly of single epochs and events, cannot alter the fact that the course of history is governed by inner general laws. For,...on the whole, in spite of the consciously desired aims of all individuals, accident apparently reigns on the surface. That which is willed happens but rarely; in the majority of instances the numerous ends cross and conflict with one another, or these ends are from the outset incapable of realization....Thus the conflicts of innumerable individual wills and individual actions in the domain of history produce a state of affairs entirely analogous to that prevailing in the realm of unconscious nature.¹⁰⁰

Even if every single act did not achieve its intended end in the course of history, the fact that acts have ends, that men have projects, cannot be left out of account when we are trying to discover what it is that made the acts have the effects they had. Marx says much the same thing, more generally but more succinctly:

History does nothing, it 'possesses no immense wealth', it wages no battles'. It is man, real living man, that does all that, that possesses and fights; 'history' is not a person apart, using man as a means for its own particular aims; history is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his aims.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰Engels, "Feuerbach", p. 393.

¹⁰¹Marx, HF, p. 125.

But, as I have indicated, this does not mean that men's conscious opinions about themselves are to be taken seriously as the truth, however many clues to men's real motivations these opinions may contain.

The question is not what this or that proletarian, or even the whole of the proletariat at the moment considers its aim. The question is what the proletariat is, and what, consequent on that being, it will be compelled to do.¹⁰²

To ascertain the driving causes which here in the minds of acting masses and their leaders--the so-called great men--are reflected as conscious motives, clearly or unclearly, directly or in ideological, even glorified, form--that is the only path which can put us on the track of the laws holding sway both in history as a whole, and at particular periods and in particular lands. Everything which sets men in motion must go through their minds; but what form it will take in the mind will depend very much upon the circumstances.¹⁰³

Furthermore, the men themselves need not be aware of what is in their minds, even in its inexact forms. The test of whether a man's actions are governed by a law "is not whether or not he can formulate it, but whether it makes sense to distinguish a governed and ungoverned way in connection with what he does."¹⁰⁴

There is an immense difference between denying purposive human activity any role in the formation of history (which is what Marx is often parodied as doing) and denying that human beings understand, comprehend or can articulate the actual nature of their

¹⁰²Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁰³Engels, "Feuerbach", p. 393.

¹⁰⁴Winch, op. cit., p. 58.

purposive activity (which is what Marx wants to claim). He is claiming that history is still a natural (i.e., uncomprehended) process and that consciousness is still natural consciousness,¹⁰⁵ consciousness not consciously comprehended, or as Hegel might put it, consciousness not yet consciously self-consciousness. Hence man is still in the period of pre-history so far as really human history is concerned.

The claim that history is natural has further ^ause. Marx says: "History itself is a real part of natural history--of nature's coming to be for man."¹⁰⁶ History, that is to say, and natural science (or the development of nature by man) are the same sort of thing and they are all part of man's project to make the world an explicitly human world, a world 'for man' in which men are free. By claiming that history is natural, Marx is battering away at one of the dichotomies which keep men separated from the world which is in principle theirs.

Marx's claim that consciousness is controlled by life arose partly as an objection to the notion that individual initiative per se is a sufficient condition for explicating historical change. Yet Marx also claims that individual activity, if not individual initiative, is the only possible builder of history. We have already seen¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵We mean this sort of consciousness when we speak of the 'characteristic consciousness of an age'.

¹⁰⁶Marx, EPM, p, 111.

¹⁰⁷In Chapter II, Part B.

that part of the answer to this problem lies in Marx's claim that initiatives, new forces in human history, arise spontaneously from the combined actions of large numbers of men without any of them necessarily knowing of the creation of these new forces. The insights of individual men are not themselves decisive; or, to put the point another way, these insights are decisive only if the material conditions surrounding the insight are prepared for it, are ready for just this catalytic force. Marx, that is to say, held that revolutions happen, not when some man or group of men want them to happen or think they should happen, but when they have to happen: here we see something of the place of intellectual vanguards in revolutionary movements. Marx did not deny ideas a role in changing history. To do this would be self-contradictory in the most obvious way. He merely wanted ideas to be modest about their role.

Consciousness and Freedom: Preliminary Distinctions

Man is social or conscious only because he is both. 'Freedom' is a concept that applies sensibly to conscious beings. Hence man's sociality is necessary for freedom to apply sensibly to him. Marx at one point claims that co-operation now is "not voluntary, but natural".¹⁰⁸ From this we can see that consciousness is more than a bare conceptual pre-requisite of freedom: conscious comprehension is a necessary condition of freedom. To be natural is, as we saw, to

¹⁰⁸Marx, GI, p. 24.

be unconscious, non-comprehended, not understood. Marx here says that natural co-operation (natural social relations) are non-voluntary; that is to say, not free. Therefore, co-operation that is not comprehended is co-operation that is necessarily not free. On the other hand, comprehended co-operation is not necessarily free co-operation; it is merely co-operation which we can meaningfully examine from the point of view of freedom. Comprehension, then, is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of freedom. This is seen practically in the fact that a man can organize because he is conscious, and that the more conscious he is of the circumstances he is organizing the more likely he is to be able to control them and hence to be free in relation to them; but that he might thoroughly, even profoundly understand some set of conditions without being able to control them.

CHAPTER IV

THE ESSENCE OF MAN IS SOCIAL RELATIONS

Introduction

Social relations form man, hence he is essentially public, that is to say, objective and knowable. Opinions about actions matter less than the content of actions insofar as our understanding of social man is concerned. The last two chapters established these claims, and the chapter before that established in a general way that social relations define large social groups. This chapter sets out what social relations do and what in the content of actions is significant, and thus states more concretely than previously the relation of social relations and essence. The nature of man's essence now, the problem of Marx's determinism and the notion of a 'characteristic consciousness' receive further definition.

The problem of essence divides into four areas of concern:

1. general truths; 2. philosophical approaches; 3. specific historical forms of social relations; and 4. man's essence, or the demand for new social relations. The first two categories are philosophical and last two are historical. The first and the fourth have been dealt with to some extent already, but it still remains for me to resolve the second and third. With these two it is not easy to keep philosophical and historical categories separate, unless one can call on some results of marxist analysis. Two mistaken attempts at defining the essence of man show us in a general way the aspect of men's acts with which we are concerned in this chapter.

A. Two Ahistorical Attempts to Define Human Nature

We might attempt to give an account of human nature in the following manner: 'A man is a thing that wants food, sex and warmth. He has flesh, likes people, uses his hands, and wants to be free.' This attempt is both misleading and trivial. Sex, for example, is a very different thing for youthful lovers, a child rapist, and a Negro sleeping with a white woman in Georgia. Or, to take another case, freedom is something very different to Negroes who are offered it as a gift and to Negroes who have to burn and kill to get it.¹⁰⁹ Every attitude and emotion differs according to its different social circumstances.

A second attempt might be built around this move: 'Men are alienated; therefore a man is a thing that is alienated. Men labour; therefore it is of the essence of man to labour', and so on. In both attempts acts explicable only in terms of men living together have been reduced to abstract qualities common to men even if they existed outside of social relations. Man's relations with other men have been hypostatized into abstract qualities, and thus robbed of all their specific meaning.

Both attempts abstract from human situations the least human aspects of human activities. People are taken to be things; the 'eternal' skeleton of their nature is taken to be central. Yet

¹⁰⁹Pace Sir Isaiah Berlin's Two Concepts of Liberty, (Oxford, at the Clarendon Press, 1958), P.3.

even the most basic human need could have no content unless it was shaped in situations involving a complex set of customs, habits, attitudes, intentions; involving, in a word, people. Many of the Theses on Feuerbach are concerned to make this point.¹¹⁰ Human needs manifest themselves in a wide range of intentions and projects by people whose acts fit into quite different pictures of man's situation. These, the intentions behind the act, the picture of the world of which it is part, the function the act serves in society, are the important part of the act--so important that it is features of this sort which determine for Marx whether or not acts may be called truly human (i.e., whether or not they are fulfilling the possibilities called man's essence now). I shall call the general collection of attributes of an act its form.¹¹¹ Each attribute is institutionalized; hence the form of men's acts is determined by social relations. The form is the principle subject of this chapter.

I have indicated two ways of attempting to describe the essence of man: what both do is to change trivially true statements into interesting but false ones. This mistake results from a mistaken usage of general truths about all men anywhere. As I have already argued, such truths can be used to set the stage for analysis or even to indicate the flaws in a mistaken analysis. But if they are re-

¹¹⁰Cf. especially Theses I, IV, VI, IX and X.

¹¹¹Wittgenstein speaks of the 'history' of an act in characterizing a similar set of attributes: "I am not ashamed of what I did then, but of the intention which I had."--And didn't the intention lie also in what I did? What justifies the shame? The whole history of the incident." (PI, Remark 644)

garded as informative in themselves, our analysis soon collapses into the kind of unhistorical absolutism I have described. For example, by being reminded that 'man is social' (that is, by having the historically-determined content of this concept called to mind), we can see the direction of error in the two analyses above.¹¹² But in themselves, we must not forget, trivial truths are merely trivial. Often, in fact, trivial truths can be cited in support of either side of directly opposed conclusions.

Marx was aware of the uses of trivial truths. He notes this situation: "The social power...which arises through the co-operation of different individuals,...appears to these individuals, since their co-operation is not voluntary but natural, not as their own united power but as an alien force outside them."¹¹³ Marx cuts through this false appearance, this mystification, by pointing out, using various synonyms, that 'nature is a human creation'. There is nothing illogical or contradictory about men making a world and it also appearing alien to them. There is a mystification involved, however, because this alien world also appears not man-made. By showing this to be mistaken, Marx also shows that the alien appearance of the world is not inevitable, but a result of social conditions. Stripping the world of its facade of inevitable hostility is, by itself, a powerful force for social change, because the general, conceptual truth that 'nature is a human creation' has moral

¹¹²This might remind us of Wittgenstein's notion that the aim of philosophy is to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle. (PI, Remark 319)

¹¹³Marx, GI, p. 24.

significance in our time: a man-made world should be a world which serves man's interests. This pattern represents a defensible way of using general truths.

The two earlier attempts, however, misconceive the whole development of general truths. Both attempts fail to see that individual men are part of and hence variations on one process, society. Hence, they also fail to see that it is with variations and not what is common among men that analysis begins. Analysis is a matter of finding resemblances in collections of variations, not precise similarities among a number of exactly-duplicated but otherwise discrete objects. Hence these two attempts at defining human nature show little sensitivity to the real but much less exact ways in which there do exist genuine similarities of form among otherwise quite different human acts.

B. Social Relations and Essence

It might appear that an historical claim and a philosophical stratagem are conflated in the claim that 'the essence of man is social relations'. The philosophical claim is that social relations are the key to understanding man; that because all human existence is social, our study of man must be from the standpoint of social relations. The historical claim is that the essence of historical man is determined by, is a product of, or even is social relations. This historical claim is correct--but only because it is not really an historical claim; rather, it is the form of historical claims in

general.¹¹⁴ It is not an historical claim because it can draw no historical distinctions. That is to say, Marx's first doctrine of essence, the essence of man, is entirely a philosophical doctrine. And the third sort of inquiry analyses the specific, concrete embodiments of the philosophical doctrine.

On the other hand, the fourth subject of inquiry, man's essence, does make an historical claim--yet it also has a philosophical side. If the key to understanding man is social relations, then the key to understanding social relations is to see the divisions within social relations. We cannot understand present social relations (and especially their contradictions) unless we also see the way in which men strive to overcome the contradictions, to achieve truly human lives, and hence truly human social relations. That is to say, in order to understand man we must take account of the content of man's essence: Marx's attempts to learn the essence of man are attempts to understand how men (i.e., social relations) change. His philosophical stratagems and the historical claims which justify his stratagems all have this ultimate aim.

Someone might object: 'But you said that "man's essence" is a creation of productive activity. How can you maintain the conceptual primacy of social relations in understanding this phenomenon, a crucial one for our understanding of social change?' The roles of

¹¹⁴"6.32 The law of causality is not a law but the form of a law."
Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 173.

productive activity and social relations in the formation and understanding of 'man's essence' are these: productive activity spontaneously creates, variously throughout history, man's essence; and the appearance of this essence is a sign that productive activity has outstripped old social relations of production. Man's essence is the potential in men's acts for a new form of productive activity, a new set of relations of production. Social relations are the key to understanding this phenomenon because (a) it arises as a response to, and hence is determined by, the old productive relations, and (b) the demand for new productive relations must be manifest in man's productive activity which is still formed by the old productive relations. Hence the key to understanding man's essence is social relations.

C. Social Relations Form Men's Acts

Earlier I claimed that it is the form of men's acts that matters so far as understanding social change is concerned, and that form is determined by social relations. A corollary of this second claim is that social relations are uncovered in the form of men's acts.

As Wittgenstein notes,¹¹⁵ the character of an act is a result of its whole history. The character, or form, of an act is expressed in the intentions of the actor and in the effect of the act on the world, both of which are a result of the history of the acts and the

¹¹⁵Wittgenstein, PI, Remark 644.

actor. The actor's projects will be formed by, and for our purposes can be considered as having the same form as, his Weltanschauung, which is formed, in turn, by social relations. To cite a grossly over-simplified example of the pattern, a man's approach to other men might be governed by his unexamined (and even unarticulated) view that all relations between men are essentially competitive, a view determined by his participation in capitalist relations of production. This is an example of social relations determining the form of a man's acts. In addition, the effect of a man's acts is determined by the social relations within which the acts occur, because social relations determine the range of possible effects. The same social relations form the act and its effect; hence from the effect we can read a good deal about the form of the act itself.

The form of an act is that about an act which is significant to the projects of life of that time, these projects usually involving establishing, consolidating, or destroying a particular set of social relations. Form is that about an act, generally, which has human significance; it is the real point of an act. Marx uses 'essence' in a very similar way; he says of crude communism, for example, that "It has grasped its concept, but not its essence":¹¹⁶ it has grasped its nature, but not its point, its reason. Bourgeois productive relations form acts now; and within these relations there exists a demand for a new set, truly human relations.

¹¹⁶Marx, EPM, p. 102.

The way in which men produce their means of subsistence depends first of all on the nature of the actual means they find in existence and have to reproduce. This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite mode of life on their part. As individuals express their lives, so they are. What they are, therefore, co-incides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce. It will be clear by now that the distinction between what and how is only methodological, and has not correspondence to the permanent shape of reality.⁷ The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production.¹¹⁷

Material conditions reproduce in men the form of activity they have accumulated. Only at times of social revolution, when a new form of activity transforms material conditions, is the pattern of joint and simultaneous development of form in man and nature broken.

The distinction between an object and the form of activity of someone using it disappears because men make over objects so that objects express the same form of activity as men making them. There is one exception to this rule: the distinction appears when man's essence appears, because then productive activity does have a form which is distinct from the form (the old social relations) of objects of activity. Consequently, when there is a useful distinction to be drawn between the form and the objects of activity, the distinction parallels that between man's essence and his existence. The form-matter distinction appears and disappears according to historical circumstances. "Thinking and being are no doubt distinct, but they also form a unity."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Marx, GI, p. 7.

¹¹⁸ Marx, EPM, p. 105.

D. Productive Acts and Productive Forces

Typically, then, productive activity and the forces of production have the same form. 'But', someone might object, 'does not your analysis of the influence of social relations on the form of objects leave out of account the objective factors, the role of resources, the raw material of labour, and tools, the technology of labour?' The reply¹¹⁹ to this objection is to be found in my claim that objects are institutionalized. Allegedly 'subjective' factors like social relations and productive activity, and 'objective' factors like resources and tools, are all, equally, human creations. The form of social relations is the form of them all. Resources are a particular manifestation of the social relations of an era. And technology is a particular manifestation of the form of labour of the period, i.e., of social relations. Resources and technology, in fact, offer particularly clear examples of what I have called institutionalization. From the point of view of form, productive forces and productive activity are indistinguishable except when historical circumstances distinguish them: "...a certain mode of production, or industrial stage, is always combined with a certain mode of co-operation, or social stage, and this mode of co-operation is itself a 'productive force'."¹²⁰

¹¹⁹This rebuttal is directed against Vernon Venable's account of the the productive process. Venable leaves untouched the kind of rigid subject-object distinction I have been criticizing. (Human Nature, The Marxian View (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1945), pp. 91 ff.)

¹²⁰Marx, GI, p. 18.

Underlying the forces of production (such as transportation, natural resources, geography, level of industrialization, size, density and level of organization of populations) are the social relations of production. These relations shape the activity of producing individuals; hence they give a particular human form to all other forces of production.

Here we see the cancellation of the supposed independence of kinds of acts and forms of acts. Together, for example, with the ordering of man's activity as if all men were related by competition comes the creation of vast chains of machines all set to one task.

Machinery is no more an economic category than is the ox which draws the plow. Machinery is only a productive force. The modern workshop, which is based on the use of machinery, however, is a social relationship of production, an economic category.¹²¹

Because men acted out the relations appropriate to machines, they have transformed human reality into one vast machine: "Fixed capital shows to what degree the social forces of production are produced, not only in the form of knowledge, but also as direct instruments of social practice and of the real life process."¹²² Forces and the activity of production are indeed one.

Incidentally, the fact that the creation of the modern workshop serves to consolidate and justify the ordering of human activity according to competitive principles, or mechanically, offers a splendid example of the circularity of ideological justification. The

¹²¹Marx, EPM, p. 80.

¹²²Marx, Grundrisse, p. 584 (quoted in Bottomore, op. cit., p. 91.).

use men make of Darwin's theory of the struggle for survival is another. As Engels points out:

The whole Darwinian theory of the struggle for existence is simply the transference from society to organic nature of Hobbes' theory of bellum omnium contra omnes, and of the bourgeois economic theory of competition, as well as the Malthusian theory of population.¹²³

Yet how many apologists for capitalism have used crude versions of the competitive nature of human beings and of the theory of the survival of the fittest to justify their own savagery?

E. Man's Essence and Social Change

The historical doctrine of essence, the fourth subject of inquiry, is central to what I want to say about freedom in the next section of this essay, so let us consider it further.

Men and circumstances are one process, from the point of view of form (which is to say, from the point of view of understanding social change), except in those specific historical situations in which it becomes temporarily worthwhile to make the distinction. Both develop together because both are human creations. To claim this is to supersede most formulations of the individual-and-society distinction. Man's essence is a phenomenon of social change, as we have seen; let us examine the distinction between men and circumstances from this standpoint.

¹²³Engels, Dialectics of Nature, p. 404.

The co-incidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and understood only as revolutionizing practice.¹²⁴

In general, self and circumstances change together because man transforms circumstances according to his 'interpretation' of human existence. The relation of the change of self and circumstances can be conceived according to the pattern of development of two transformations from quantitative change into qualitative change. The two are: the change of grains of sand into a heap of sand, the change of a plurality into one thing; and, the change of water into ice.¹²⁵ We might describe the first as the more conceptual of the two and the second as the more physical. No change occurs in the substance of the sand; however an important change occurs in the meaning the grains have for us. Both types of change occur when water becomes ice.

The first pattern applies to pre-revolutionary changes in the form of man's activity. When man's essence is manifest historically, a new set of standards defining the most suitable form of co-operation spring up, showing us that men have, quite non-consciously, re-interpreted their position in the world. This new potential form, which is now the natural form of activity, cannot express itself freely and a tension is generated. This tension, between the new capacity of men's productive activity and old social relations, quickly intensifies in a series of quantitative steps and ends in an explosion which transforms the whole of social life. Because this

¹²⁴Marx, Theses on Feuerbach, Thesis III.

¹²⁵Both Winch (op. cit., p. 73) and H. B. Acton (The Illusion of the Epoch (London, Cohen and West Ltd., 1955), pp. 80 ff.) distinguish the two kinds of quantity-quality transformation, but neither use them as I do here.

transformation makes concrete the new interpretation of human existence at the same time as it reforms existence according to the interpretation, it is like the transformation of water into ice.

From the outside, this transformation appears, just like the change from water to ice, a radical break with the old. But the dynamic of the transformation is the new form of men's lives, man's essence, establishing itself as concrete social relations, and within the new form is found the transformed old. New ways of using old productive forces are one example of this continuity within transformation.

Marx thought that a revolution was likely; this means that man's essence should be manifesting itself, because of definite developments in productive activity beyond bourgeois forms of organization.

If millions of proletarians feel themselves by no means contented in their conditions of life, if their essence is in contradiction with their 'existence', then it is certainly an abnormality, but not an unhappy chance; an historical fact based on quite definite social relations.¹²⁶

In this essay I cannot show Marx's historical evidence for his claims concerning the nature of man's essence now. In general, however, man's essence in mature capitalist society, Marx thought, was the capacity of productive activity to be concretely free. This capacity creates a demand for social relations in which men can be free, a demand for truly human social relations. These new relations are none other than the social relations of socialism.

¹²⁶Marx, GI, p. 34.

The ideal of a truly human life can be used critically, as a standard by which to judge behaviour. For example, in capitalist societies women are a form of private property. Primitive communism, which is Marx's subject in the quotation following, merely transforms women into public property:

In /the relationship of man to woman/...is sensuously manifest, reduced to an observable fact, the extent to which the human essence has become nature to man, or to which nature has to him become the human essence of man,...the extent to which the human essence in him has become a natural essence /the normal way of his life/,...the extent to which his human nature has become nature to him.¹²⁷

As we have seen,¹²⁸ the standard of the truly human life arose out of post-Renaissance notions concerning man: it is a vision of a socialized man and humanized nature. Whether or not the vision is arbitrary, and such content as it is possible to give the notion in abstraction, are subjects taken up in my last chapter.

F. Characteristic Consciousness

The notion that historical periods manifest a 'characteristic consciousness' lends support to my arguments concerning 'man's essence'. The claim that each age manifests its own Weltanschauung is compatible with my claim that history is divided up into successive transformations of human existence according to new capacities developed in human activity. Society is one process, manifesting

¹²⁷Marx, EPM, p. 101.

¹²⁸Chapter II, Part A.

one form of activity at any one time, which means that individuals live through the same form of activity in a given society at a given time. Men in one society live out one form of life, except, as I have pointed out, when man's essence has appeared.

I should now show that the forms of life of societies change sufficiently to speak of them as different forms, and that the forms cohere into distinguishable periods. Both, unfortunately, are historical demands. The first, however, is almost self-evident. Although I cannot offer the proof of the second, I can cite from Berlin the strongest of negative reasons to support the notion of a characteristic consciousness, the manifest silliness of the alternative. To see history as developing along a single continuum is quite ludicrous, "...as if all previous economic systems were so many blundering approximations to capitalism, by the standards of which they must be classified and assessed."¹²⁹ The notion of an historical period manifesting its own unique 'consciousness', its own 'picture' of the nature of human relations, would seem to be unavoidable.

Conclusion

Seeing Marx as a social determinist almost inevitably involves reading into him a rigid subject-object distinction. He himself gives us no reason to do so, and every reason to suspect such attempts on the part of others. In fact, so strong is Marx's tendency

¹²⁹ Isaiah Berlin, Karl Marx (London, Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 88-89.

to break down the absoluteness of philosophically-conceived dichotomies that he thought of communism itself as the resolution of such dichotomies. This is

communism as the positive transcendence of private property as human self-estrangement, and therefore as the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man; communism therefore as the complete return of man to himself as a social (i.e., human) being--a return become conscious, and accomplished within the entire wealth of previous development. This communism, as fully-developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully-developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between nature and man--the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species.¹³⁰

Communism, of course, is a result of 'revolutionizing practice'. The resolution of philosophical dichotomies, Marx believed, lies in the achievement of truly human social relations. Only when this more complete form of life is established will we be able to understand human existence as it actually is; only then will we be free of mystification:

The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.¹³¹

¹³⁰Marx, EPM, p. 109.

¹³¹Marx, Theses on Feuerbach, Thesis XI.

SECTION I

THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Article I

Section 1. All legislative Powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States, which shall consist of a Senate and House of Representatives.

SECTION III

FREEDOM

Section 1. The Congress shall have the Power to regulate Commerce with foreign Nations, to regulate Commerce among the several States, and to regulate Commerce with the Indian Tribes; to establish an uniform Rule of Naturalization; to coin Money, to regulate the Value thereof, and to fix the Standard of Weights and Measures; to define and punish Offenses against the Law of Nations; to define and punish Offenses against the Law of the United States; to define and punish Offenses committed on the high Seas, or in any Manner subject to the Jurisdiction of the United States; to declare War, to issue Letters of Marque and Reprisal, and to grant Letters of Consue and Safe Conduct; to raise and support Armies, but no Appropriation of Money to that Use shall be for a longer Term than two Years; to provide and maintain a Navy; to make and enforce Laws, not inconsistent with the Constitution and the Laws of the United States, for the Punishment of Offenses against the same; to make all Laws necessary and proper for carrying into Execution the foregoing Powers, and all other Powers vested by this Constitution in the Government of the United States.

Section 2. The Congress shall have the Power to regulate Commerce with foreign Nations, to regulate Commerce among the several States, and to regulate Commerce with the Indian Tribes; to establish an uniform Rule of Naturalization; to coin Money, to regulate the Value thereof, and to fix the Standard of Weights and Measures; to define and punish Offenses against the Law of Nations; to define and punish Offenses against the Law of the United States; to define and punish Offenses committed on the high Seas, or in any Manner subject to the Jurisdiction of the United States; to declare War, to issue Letters of Marque and Reprisal, and to grant Letters of Consue and Safe Conduct; to raise and support Armies, but no Appropriation of Money to that Use shall be for a longer Term than two Years; to provide and maintain a Navy; to make and enforce Laws, not inconsistent with the Constitution and the Laws of the United States, for the Punishment of Offenses against the same; to make all Laws necessary and proper for carrying into Execution the foregoing Powers, and all other Powers vested by this Constitution in the Government of the United States.

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CHAPTER V

THE INCOHERENCE OF THE 'PHILOSOPHICAL' PROBLEM OF FREEDOM

Introduction

I have already tried to show that Marx is not a social determinist in the usual sense, but we may still ask if social determinism as such is tenable. Marx may help us answer this question too. The following two chapters attempt to show, respectively, that freedom is merely a practical problem, and that freedom as the essence of man is a quite ordinary phenomenon, however difficult it is to achieve practically.

A. Determinism: The 'Philosophical' Problem of Freedom

One form of the supposed philosophical problem of freedom can be expressed as follows: 'Given what we know about the ways in which a man can be influenced by forces of which he need not even be aware; given that everything we learn, every piece of information we have, every custom and habit originate outside us, what possibility is there that men can be free?' Complete absence of restraint is the ideal of freedom held out by this statement of the problem. It is freedom as the undisturbed right to act with total caprice and to 'enjoy the whims of fortuity'.¹³² This is the ideal of freedom

¹³²"The right to the undisturbed enjoyment of fortuity and chance has up until now been called personal freedom: but these conditions fortuity and chance are, of course, only the productive forces and forms of intercourse at any particular time." (GI, p. 75)

It will be objected immediately that the practical demand of social determinists is merely that men be able to choose what

held out by many theorists of capitalism; gambling, this is as much as to say, is the authentic expression of capitalist social ideals. Freedom of this sort is so free that even the influence of physical determinants mitigates against it.

That even people's subjection to the laws of causality proves this freedom impossible says nothing about the role of causality, however, and everything about this ideal of freedom: conceptual nonsense of two different sorts is involved. First, the supposed philosophical problem of freedom and causality is mistaken because it is built around a mistaken conception of the way in which people are physically bound. Secondly, it is mistaken because it misconceives the character of the physical world. Inherent in this problem of freedom is the claim that merely having a body (as opposed to having a particular type of body) limits freedom--as if freedom were something which involved alternatives such as having or not having a body, of being or not being free of the law of gravity. Yet that I am a physical object in a physical world is an unalterable precondition of the context within which problems of freedom arise. Any act involves the physical world (a man cannot act--or not act--without this involvement); hence any act can be 'free' or 'unfree' only within and after this involvement. A particular kind of involvement

influences them and how. From their own point of view, however, this case is just a particular instance of the more general problem, how to argue that men are free from outside influences. They assume that there is a sharp split between men and the 'outside'--in some sense or other. Hence men could be free to choose what influences them only if they were free of outside influences.

with the physical world (e.g., alienated) may affect one's freedom, but the fact of involvement itself can neither enhance nor detract from freedom.

Secondly, the way in which the physical world limits people even practically is conceived of by theorists of the freedom and causality problem as being in principle different from the way the social world limits freedom. While this is clearly correct from some points of view, it is also clearly wrong from one very important one. The physical world, nature, is just accumulated labour, as we have already seen; this holds in the relevant sense whether or not men have actually changed the physical shape of the world with their activity. Nature in itself holds no implications at all for freedom: the fact that trees exist or that coal is found over there could hold no implications for human freedom unless these facts have a human significance. Only by being institutionalized can they have this significance; which is to say, objects that stand in any relation to freedom are man-made. If nature is just accumulated human subjectivity (labour), it cannot threaten the possibility of freedom except insofar as human activity itself can threaten freedom.

Physical determinism, then, can pose no threat to freedom by itself; now we must go on to see that the same holds for social determinism.

B. Social Determinism

In its most naive form--and this is perhaps its most honest form!--social determinism is clearly nonsense. It claims that men have no influence at all on the course of social (historical) events. Marx would have found such a notion incomprehensible, as he makes clear repeatedly: "It can truly be asserted that all human relations and functions, however and wherever they manifest themselves, influence material production and have a more or less determining effect on it."¹³³

A slightly more sophisticated form of the problem of social determinism holds that because everything which a man is comes from outside him, he is determined by his society. This version depends on a free person being conceived of as someone entirely independent of his society; it depends, that is to say, on a clear division between individuals and Society. This does indeed seem to pose a problem of freedom for more than one person, because every person's freedom appears likely to be at the expense of every other person's. The division also makes pure caprice or God the only guarantors of standards, and co-operation a miracle of monumental proportions because together with this vision of man as radically isolated goes the notion that he acts, in principle, from motives of simple self-interest.

Clearly there is something fundamentally mistaken about this and all problems of freedom which depend on a rigid distinction between

¹³³Marx, Theories of Surplus Value (Moscow, Foreign Languages Publishing House, undated), p. 389.

the Individual and Society, if only because, to put the point crudely, a man is just a part of a society and society is nothing but a collection of men.¹³⁴

What is to be avoided above all is the...establishing of 'Society' as an abstraction vis-à-vis the individual. The individual is the social being. His life, even if it may not appear in the direct form of a communal life carried out with others--is therefore an expression and confirmation of social life. Man's individual and species life are not different....¹³⁵

If every activity of men is shaped by what the activities of other men have developed in him (through the repository of men's acts, society), and if this shape is the result of man's acting in the world and hence 'learning' what other men have done, then the distinction between individuals and society looks very dubious indeed if it is taken to be anything more than a practical one. Moreover, it is almost impossible to pin down either in principle or in practical cases, and hence is useless in philosophical argument.

In a voluntary act,...it is impossible to say just where historical forces end and ours begin, and strictly speaking the question is meaningless, since there is history only for a subject who lives through it, and a subject only insofar as he is historically situated.¹³⁶

Social determinists ignore the role of socially-organized men in history and claim that man, conceptually the only man in the universe, can never be free because 'history' constantly prevents it--

¹³⁴Marx, Theses on Feuerbach, Thesis I.

¹³⁵Marx, EPM, p. 105.

¹³⁶Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception (New York, The Humanities Press, 1962), p. 173.

this is the real significance of the nonsense that "men exist so that history can exist"¹³⁷ perpetrated by decadent German idealism--or else they commit the even stranger folly of eliminating man from the universe altogether, asserting that men are nothing but what society has made them--as if the 'society' in question were itself unmade! The first determinist universe contains one man, who is unfree; the second contains none. That such nonsense could seem a philosophical problem is only a comment on the men who conceived of it and the world which 'determined' them. The whole question is built on a confusion between a conceptual and a practical matter. Because men see that freedom is impossible now, given present social conditions, they have been mystified into thinking that it is impossible. Yet the world can appear alienated, out of control, a threat to my freedom only because it is the creation of human beings.

Marx, by making the claim that men will become free for reasons of enlightened self-interest, seems to fall prey to the same sort of objection as the one I raised against theorists who believe that men's acts spring from motives of radical self-interest. It seems that it can be objected that Marx too makes caprice the only possible foundation for standards and makes co-operation a miracle. This is not the place to consider the first objection; the second is dealt with in this way. Marx avoids the dangers of theories starting from self-interest by claiming that true self-interest must be built on motives of other than self-interest. Acts which are truly

¹³⁷Marx, HF, p. 250.

self-interested, which result in truly human development, are acts done with an eye solely to the human value of the act itself and not to its value 'for me'.¹³⁸ This distinction will be worth remembering when we consider what Marx thought concrete freedom in our era would be.

Conceptually speaking, individuals and the society they make up are one and the same thing. We saw that this is the case because, except when historical circumstances dictate otherwise, the form of activity of all individuals is roughly the same. In fact, the interests of given individuals and their society are often sharply, even savagely, opposed. Then society appears as a realm of necessity. Men create such a "realm of necessity, where expansion of freedom in one direction always involves restriction of freedom in another" only within a conceptual framework allowing for the practical possibility that society might become a "realm of freedom, where expansion of freedom in one direction aids expansion of freedom in others".¹³⁹ We saw that the problem of social determinism is built on^a division between each man and his world. That is to say, it is built on a sharp split between subject and object. To see the practical or non-absolute nature of this split is to see that social determinism cannot be coherently stated, or that society is implicitly a 'realm of freedom'. If the split between subject and object were correct,

¹³⁸This also gives us insight into what Marx means by the truly human life being free.

¹³⁹Martin Milligan, "Marxism and Morality", Marxism Today, Jan. 1965, p. 20.

then human development could sensibly be conceived of as involving an infinite regression leading back to the question 'Who begot the first man?' In this regression:

You must also hold onto the circular movement sensuously perceptible in the regression, by which man repeats himself in procreation, thus always remaining the subject. You will reply, however: I grant you this circular movement; now grant me the progression which drives me ever further until I ask: Who begot the first man, and nature as a whole. I can only answer you: Your question itself is a product of abstraction. Ask yourself how you arrived at that question. Ask yourself whether your question is not posed from a standpoint to which I cannot give a reply, because it is a perverse one. Ask yourself whether that progression as such exists for a reasonable mind. When you ask about the creation of nature and man, you are abstracting, in so doing, from man and nature. You postulate them as non-existent, and yet you want me to prove them to you as existing. Now I say to you: Give up your abstraction and you will also give up your question. Or if you want to hold on to your abstraction, then be consistent, and if you think of man and nature as non-existent, then think of yourself as non-existent, for you too are surely nature and man. Don't think, don't ask me, for as soon as you think and ask, your abstraction from the existence of nature and man has no meaning. Or are you such an egoist that you postulate everything as nothing, and yet want yourself to be?...For the socialist man, the entire history of the world is nothing but the begetting of man through human labour.¹⁴⁰

There are not two things, individuals and society, but one, individuals, considered from the point of view of their individuality, and from the point of view of the groups they form. It makes as little sense to ask for social relations free of individual human beings as it does to consider human beings outside of their social relations. The treatment of the subject-object distinction in earlier chapters using the fact that human activity is sensuous, public and, in a sense, objective should demonstrate this.

¹⁴⁰Marx, EPM, p. 113.

Because the individual exists in his social relations and because the collective is a society of individuals, the problem of freedom is not the problem of the individual against society but the problem of what sort of society we want and what sort of individuals we want to be. Then un-freedom is everything which stands in the way of this.¹⁴¹

A correct statement of the subject-object distinction shows that the ideal of freedom which underlies social determinism is misconceived. This is also true at the practical level, because a freedom which was merely the absence of outside restraint or influence could well be a very paltry freedom if the one 'freed' was still the slave of crass ignorance, or insensitivity, or whatever. The subject-object distinction when correctly conceived has two further salutary effects: conceptually it shows that the 'philosophical' problem of freedom/determinism cannot be stated coherently, and, practically, it shows that men cannot be free unless they live in a free community.

'Nature is a human creation' involves the assertion that 'man's activity is objective'; and both depend on man's being social.

Thus society is the consummated oneness in substance of man and nature--the true resurrection of nature--the naturalism of man and the humanism of nature brought together to fulfillment.¹⁴²

Involved in this is the claim that human activity in any given era has a unity; hence we can speak of the 'characteristic consciousness' of an age. There is no deep conceptual difference between a man's intentions, purposes, goals, beliefs and those he finds in the material at hand. Each man is a thing among things because things too are human creations.

¹⁴¹MacIntyre, op. cit., p. 22.

¹⁴²Marx, EPM, p. 104.

C. Freedom and Community

Concrete freedom (as opposed to an awareness of the active possibility of freedom) must be based upon a lack of deep conflict between an individual and the community in which he lives. Because the individual's life shares with his community a common form, a common approach and common projects (at the conceptual, if not the day-to-day, level), conflict with his community is conflict within himself. The phenomenon of the internality of external conflict is manifest practically in the case of the man who sees some absolutely crucial good which his community could achieve or some disastrous mistake that it is making but who cannot make the other members of his community do anything about it.

There are three criteria which we might be tempted to apply when trying to decide whether a man is in harmony with his community: satisfaction, control and creation. A man might seem in harmony with his world (the place where and the time when he lives his life) if he could use it as he willed, or control it, or if he had created it. The first can be submerged in the second, control, for the moment; neither are adequate because it is entirely possible to control things (e.g., an unlimited supply of heroin) which in no other way enhance freedom and which even detract from it. The third criterion is inadequate because men create things of which they lose control (e.g., men created commodities, but now commodities control men). But we must not abandon control too quickly. It is a necessary stage on the way to freedom, even if it is not sufficient in itself.

Control is not relevant to a completely free world because 'control' can be relevantly applied only to things which still appear as needing control, even if only potentially. To live freely is to live in terms of the possibilities offered by the acts of other men; if one tries to live outside them, then the sort of self-conflict mentioned earlier ensues. This means that for freedom to be possible the acts of other men, society, must be adequate to the demands placed upon them by freedom. But if society appears as something which must be 'kept down', 'manipulated', 'controlled' then it is not adequate to freedom.¹⁴³ At most it is something on the way to becoming adequate. Freedom as leeway is a necessary stage on the way to concrete freedom. Hence when society is adequate to freedom, then control will no longer be a relevant concept. There is an important general conclusion to be drawn from this argument as well: Freedom is not a matter of satisfying any single criterion. Rather, it is something to be decided on in each case using an indefinite number of criteria, a number which each case itself will dictate.

Marx and Engels were fully aware of how necessary a free community is to achieving personal freedom: "Only in community with others has each individual the means of cultivating his gifts in all directions; only in community, therefore, is personal freedom possible."¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³Marx uses this pattern of argument in speaking of the achievement of communism. EPM, p. 164.

¹⁴⁴Marx, GI, p. 74.

Not only is freedom possible only in a community adequate to freedom; freedom is also encouraged and enhanced in such a community.

D. The Incoherence of Social Determinism

We have seen that the mere fact of physical involvement is totally without relevance to the question of freedom. We can now see that the same argument applies to the equally unavoidable involvement of men with other men. If a man is a creature of his conditions, he is a creature now, in this world, because of historical conditions, and not in principle. If he is a creature of, as opposed to, say, a participant in, his world, it is because of stupidity or culpability or something similar--but not because of the way the world necessarily is. ¹⁴⁵

Since the division of the world into man and 'external mindless objectivity' is completely mistaken, if man is controlled by his world he is controlled by other men. Since each man shares a fundamental commonality with other men of his time, control by other men is, to exactly the same degree, control by himself. The only way my freedom can be limited is by another human being, since all reality is, in the relevant sense, the result of human activity, which is to say: Either I can be free or no human being can be. The notion that economic or historical forces can remove the possibility of human freedom is incoherent. Either the economic and historical forces are or they are not a human creation. If they are not, they are

¹⁴⁵Vernon Venable (op. cit., pp. 109 ff.) fails to see this distinction and compromises his interesting analysis in so doing.

incomprehensible. If they are, then the claim of determinism is the claim that human beings necessarily do something which makes freedom impossible in principle.

E. A Note on Necessity

To close this discussion, let me consider very briefly the ways in which, for Marx, human beings are in the grip of necessity. First, as we have seen, human beings are subject to relationships which are independent of their wills. These, however, pose a freedom versus necessity problem only if it is conceivable that human beings might not necessarily be subject to them. But this is not conceivable: only human beings can be free and such relationships are part of what it is to be human at all. Secondly, human beings are subject to what Marx calls 'practical necessity'--the compulsion of irresistible reasons.

Marx speaks of the necessary freeing of man to come:

When the socialist writers ascribe [an epochal] historic role to the proletariat, it is not...because they consider the proletarians as gods. Rather the contrary, since the abstraction of all humanity, even of the semblance of humanity, is practically complete in the full-grown proletariat; since the conditions of life of the proletariat sum up all the conditions of life of society today in all their inhuman acuity; since man has lost himself in the proletariat, yet at the same time has not only gained theoretical consciousness of that loss, but through urgent, no longer disguisable, absolutely imperative need--that practical expression of necessity--is driven directly to revolt against that inhumanity.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶Marx, HF, p. 52.

If reasons outside of the ken of individual men control, even compel, their actions, this happens as a matter of fact, not of necessity. For a man sufficiently intelligent to see what is happening and to see the reasons for it, these reasons are the fulfillment of his own wishes. Far from excluding human action as a real history-building force, Marx's notion of historical necessity absolutely depends on it. He is merely claiming that when all the human-created forces of a time demand it, men will act--even against what they think they should do.

CHAPTER VI

THE ESSENCE OF MAN IS FREEDOM

Introduction

Man is a species-being, not only because in practice and in theory he adopts the species as his object (his own as well as those of other things), but--and this is only another way of expressing it--but also because he treats himself as a universal and therefore a free being.¹⁴⁷

The actions of human beings themselves show us that it makes sense to apply the concept of freedom to conscious (i.e., social) beings and to nothing else, since nothing else is 'universal'. That is to say, men themselves prove their potential for freedom. The observation that freedom applies meaningfully to men can be shown negatively by noticing the pointlessness of speaking of freedom about rocks or atoms in a vacuum. The fact that freedom applies to humans at least more meaningfully than this (since it does not apply meaningfully to rocks or atoms at all) leads us to say that if anything can be free, humans can be. The previous chapter showed that nothing can stand in the way of freedom in principle, that freedom is possible. And the real problems connected with freedom, I have argued, are practical: what sort of society do we want, what sort of individuals do we want to be, and how do we achieve this society and these individuals--these are the real problems of freedom.

¹⁴⁷Marx, EPM, p. 74.

A. Is Choice Illusory?

The clearest manifestation of freedom's relevance as a concern about human beings, an even clearer manifestation than universality, is choice. To deny the possibility of freedom is to deny that choice exists.

But the real problems connected with choice are practical: to what extent in this situation do I have the necessary control of the factors involved to make an intelligent choice. But it might be objected: 'How do you know that you are really choosing?' One answer to this question lies in instances of choice themselves--they carry the evidence which allows us to decide whether or not they are illusions or real choices. But this is no answer to this objection, for the objection suggests that any instance of choice is really illusory (because of the influence of factors of which we are not aware and which really underlie our choice, or whatever). The answer to this objection is to point out that it elevates a serious practical problem into an absolute philosophical one. It is creating a significant but false problem out of a trivially true one by incorrectly conceiving the nature of an illusion. It is impossible to claim that every instance of choice is an illusion because then the application of the concept 'illusion' suddenly ceases to mean anything. What would a non-illusory choice be like? This is another aspect of the incoherence of social determinism: it must assume what it wants to deny.¹⁴⁸ Choice, then, is like rationality--it exists on a scale:

¹⁴⁸These sort of determinists need to be reminded of the dilemmas of sceptical laments: that some are pointless because the

some instances are more and some are less free. We can only be unfree because we are free.

By seeing that choices can be more or less free and that some choices are hardly free choices at all, we see the connection of choice and man's 'universality'. The freedom in any choice lies in the degree of rational comprehension of the factors involved in the choice. Hence universality is at once conceptually and practically necessary for freedom. Actually, the freedom in choice lies only partly in comprehension, because it also lies in the capability of the chooser to express his choice concretely--and this depends on the sort of world in which he lives.

B. Freedom as Man's Essence Now

Freedom, for Marx, is the concrete capacity to act out the full potential in each man. We can discover the nature of freedom and the truly human life by examining what men at present could do but are not able to.¹⁴⁹ Freedom is understanding of and sensitivity to one's society coupled with the ability to use this understanding and sensitivity with society's full co-operation; freedom is the achievement of a world in which talents are not wasted. Such a world is populated by individuals who do not distort their acts by forcing them into the service of any intention but the intentions intrinsic to the acts themselves. Spontaneity, that is to say, characterizes

sceptic knows what he thinks he wants to know, and some are pointless because he cannot know.

¹⁴⁹Marx, EPM, p. 64.

the acts of free men. To be free is to be truly human. Marx speaks of the characteristics of achieved humanity only seldom, but when he does so, it is usually in terms of the sort of world in which freedom could be achieved.

It is only when the objective world becomes everywhere for man in society the world of man's essential¹⁵⁰ powers--human reality, and for that reason the reality of his own essential powers--that all objects become for him the objectifications of himself, become objects which confirm and realize his individuality, become his objects: that is, man himself becomes the object.¹⁵¹

Only through the objectively unfolding richness of man's essential being is the richness of subjective human sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form--in short senses capable of human gratification, senses confirming themselves as essential powers of man) either cultivated or brought into being. For not only the five senses but also the so-called mental senses--the practical senses (will, love, etc.)--in a word, human sense--the humanness of the senses--comes to be by virtue of its object, by virtue of humanized nature.¹⁵²

Man does not appropriate the humanness of nature or of other men by possessing them, but in what Marx calls a 'total' manner; i.e., as a whole man for a variety, a limitless variety, of reasons. At its simplest, then, a society of free individuals is a society in which the material process of production no longer determines the entire form of human life. Hence the concrete achievement of freedom is what Marcuse calls a problem of time: "a reduction of the

¹⁵⁰It would be well to remember at this point the caution I raised earlier concerning the historical character of some of the notions (e.g., essence, humanity) which Marx occasionally uses ahistorically.

¹⁵¹Marx, EPM, pp. 107-108.

¹⁵²Ibid., p. 108.

working day to the minimum which turns quantity into quality",¹⁵³ the change being one which will teach men to use time freely, to turn it to truly human uses. As I said at the beginning of this chapter, Marx speaks of the conditions surrounding freedom only in very general terms. One thing, however, is clear; the abolition of objectification, the true achievement of objectivity for subjects, is a conditio sine qua non of concrete freedom.

C. Freedom is the Essence of Man

Hegel claimed, and Marx after him, that freedom is the essence of man. One sees immediately that this notion is conceptually plausible and practically implausible. Freedom is clearly among the candidates for certification as man's essence (Marx's second notion): for example, it has to do, not with the fact that acts happen, but with the form of acts. Whether an act is free can be decided only on the basis of the whole history of the individual concerned. 'Freedom' is also a very general notion having different specific meanings in different ages: i.e., it appears to be what I called a developing constant. Freedom appears to belong, in fact, in either category of essences, and now (i.e., in our era) it is. That it has not always been is reason to see it more as a case of the second notion of essence than of the first.

¹⁵³Herbert Marcuse, "Introduction" to Dunayevskaya, Marxism and Freedom--1776 Until Today, p. 10.

To claim that man is free is either a trivial truth or non-sense. If by the claim it is meant that men are the sort of things to which freedom sensibly applies, then everyone will immediately agree--even if only to disagree later (as would determinists, for example). If it is meant that men are significantly free now (because they choose, or whatever,) then the claim is false. If it is claimed that men are free now because they shape their environment, then it must be objected, first, that men always shape their environment, whether freely or not; and secondly, that they hardly ever fully comprehend the decisions which go into the acts involved. Animals, too, shape their environment. The claim that men create their environment is no improvement: men create children, too. And even if men fully comprehended their acts, their range of acts would still be determined by circumstances. Hence neither intellect nor choice are guarantors of freedom, although both are conditions of it.

The claim that man is free, though, might mean that man has the capacity to be free. This is the seminal issue for deciding in what sense it is that freedom is the essence of man. For, if 'freedom is the essence of man' means that all men everywhere have the capacity to be free, it is clearly false. To say of some men in some societies that they have the capacity to be free is to employ the concept of 'capacity' only in the most vacuous, unrealistic and misleading way. To claim of some people that they really have the capacity to be free is to claim that they are quite different to what they are.

It might be thought that the concept of freedom can be used like the concept of 'civil society', which, although it first arose only after the Renaissance, can meaningfully be used to explicate any class society.¹⁵⁴ This is not the case, however, because for the notion of freedom to be meaningfully applicable, the people to whom it is applied must live within the kind of social relations which create a capacity for freedom. Otherwise it is not meaningful to say either that they are free or that they are not free. They are, it might be said, below freedom. Freedom is not like consciousness, which we can use to define whether a being is human, because freedom applies meaningfully only to some humans, humans for whom freedom is at least conceptually conceivable.

That freedom appears as man's essence to men for whom freedom is now, for the first time in history, an active possibility, is no mere coincidence. The new capacity which men's activity in this era has taken on, the capacity for freedom, and its appearance as man's essence, are both governed by social relations. Thus, "Freedom is [now] so much the essence of man that even its opponents recognize it....No man fights freedom; at most he fights the freedom of others."¹⁵⁵ Freedom first appeared as a driving force in social change during the epoch that established bourgeois social relations, but that ideal of freedom has shown itself to be false. We now

¹⁵⁴Marx, CI, pp. 26-27.

¹⁵⁵Marx, from an early article on Prussian Censorship, cited in Milligan, op. cit., p. 20.

have a new way of seeing the world. Freedom, a 'freedom worthy of being called freedom', is again man's essence. This again illustrates what I mean by saying the concept of freedom is a developing constant. That men are free is a conceptual truth about most men now. But because it becomes historically qualified for every group of men, it can also serve as a standard by which to judge behaviour and social forms. This whole analysis of freedom can be summed up in the claim that freedom is a perfectly unremarkable phenomenon--it is a standard we use every day of our lives.

Conclusion

Question: 'Does not your conception of the historical nature of the concept of freedom leave freedom merely a matter of what people think? How, for example, could you distinguish between real freedom and false in a society of men all of whom thought they were free, but for totally inadequate reasons?'

Marx might reply: 'From what standpoint do you conceive of this society? Are you in it, and thus as stupid as it, or are you out of it, and thus wiser? Either alternative rejects your question. But if your real objective is to claim that my standards are arbitrary, then you might as well claim that the very appearance of human beings is arbitrary. And this is merely to abandon the meaning of the word. I can make this claim because my standards are (I hope) the standards built into the way men interpret the world in this era; men's acts

have spontaneously created the standards which I am articulating. Men are living these standards. I myself might be wrong--history will be the proof of this. But the source of my standards cannot be arbitrary, because to claim this is to abandon the meaning of 'arbitrary'. My standards are the closest approximation I can achieve to the standards built into the activity of men as they move into the next epoch in history.'

The conventions on which marxism bases itself try to be the conventions of the way men act: conventions through which they think and which give form to everything they do. Because of this, these men's essence is the form of the truly human society:

Marx accepts the 'value' of the humane society (socialism) as standard for thought and action as one accepts the value of health as standard for diagnosis and treatment of disease.¹⁵⁶

Freedom is a practical problem, an unremarkable phenomenon--and the standard by which we judge men's acts.

¹⁵⁶Marcuse, op. cit., p. 10.

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